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LOVE, *the* JUDGE

WYMOND CAREY

1. Fiction, English

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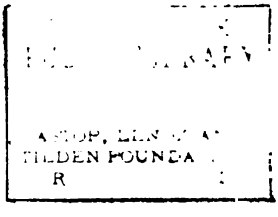
LOVE, THE JUDGE


TILDEN FOUNDA

"Mrs. Barclay," said a voice, terrible in its calm,
"take your arm from Mr. Forster's
shoulder at once."

(Page 271)

LOVE, THE JUDGE

BY

WYMOND CAREY

AUTHOR OF "MONSIEUR MARTIN," "NO. 101,"
"FOR THE WHITE ROSE,"

"So to conduct one's life as to realize one's self—this seems to me the highest attainment possible to a human being. It is the task of one and all of us, but most of us bungle it."—IBSEN.

FRONTISPIECE BY GEORGE BREHM

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TO
MY SISTER

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN WHO CAME BACK

THE morning express from Paddington slipped swiftly across the Black Bridges familiar to boating men. The solitary occupant of one of the first-class smoking carriages shut his guide-book with a snap, lit a cigarette and looked out at the May landscape, across the meadows, so green against their coverlet of buttercups, at the splendid sweep of the river, so cool in the shadows of the Nuneham woods, which were just breaking into the shy brilliance of an English spring. The sunshine lay upon the land, bright yet caressing, as if it would repeat, for those who had eyes to read, the message of poetry and romance that yonder river, olive-tinted beneath its silvery sheen, had drunk in from the city it had reluctantly left behind. And perhaps that was the thought in the traveller's mind, for there was a wistful look in his gaze as he stared from the window, lost in thought. Even a careful observer might have wondered that he was in a first-class carriage at all, since his flannel shirt with the frayed turn-down collar, his faded soft felt hat, his serge suit, creased, shabby and old, were unmistakably stamped with poverty, and not even a genteel poverty. Nor did the strong tanned face, bitten into by the chisel of life, and the clear, hard, hazel-coloured eyes correct this impression. His appearance, in fact, suggested a problem, which it did not answer.

He watched the landscape unmoved—the lock and foaming lasher at Sandford disfigured by the tall mill chimney, the gleam of the winding backwater under the dwarf willows, the solitary inn on the island at Kennington where the river divides, the glimpse of Norman Iffley, dear to

artists—but it was not till the towers and spires of the university city shot their radiance into view that his lips parted in a grim satisfaction. Seen for the first time across the reservoir lying under Jacob's Ladder, and then as the background to the untidy coal-yards and railway sheds, that vision, as of a city violet-crowned, touched with the magic light that is its peculiar prerogative at all seasons, but never so magic as on a morning in May, wields an irresistible spell. And the traveller was still staring when the porter's importunity reminded him that he was staring at a station wall.

He promptly despatched his luggage to a hotel, proceeding himself on foot. The trams arrested his attention for a moment. "Horse cars," he muttered, "are a sign of culture, I guess," and then he stepped out briskly, as if he were familiar with his surroundings. As a matter of fact he had never been in Oxford before, and his calm certainty was simply a proof of how swiftly he had transferred the map from his guide-book to his brain. In fifteen minutes he had found the street he wanted, and he paused to survey it with considerable interest. Then, seeing a young man with a tattered gown on his back emerging from one of the houses, he stopped him with a question.

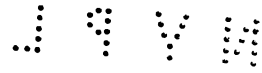
"Does Mrs. Hennessy live there?"

"Hennessy?" he replied after reflection—"oh, yes, of course; that is the name of the landlady. I suppose she does live there."

The traveller rang the bell—noting that the window on the ground floor bore a card with the announcement, "Lodgings for Commemoration"—and was ushered into a small parlour at the back of the house. He was studying the contents of this room, with keen appreciation of its patent poverty, when the landlady appeared. For a full minute the two eyed each other in silence.

"I am Mrs. Hennessy," she began. "You asked for me, did you not?"

"Yes."



The woman was tall and young, dressed in plain black with an apron, which served to emphasise her wealth of red-gold hair and her eyes, Irish in their colouring, Irish in their indefinable pathos.

"Kitty"—he took a rapid step forward—"Kitty, don't you know me?"

She put her hand to her heart. "Dick!" she exclaimed with a sobbing cry—"Dick!"

"Yes, it's Dick," he said quietly.

"You've come back," she muttered incredulously. Then she held out both hands rapturously. "I knew you would, I knew you would." She sat down overcome, while he stood beside her perfectly calm. "How did you know to find me here?" she asked incoherently.

But he only smiled.

"Yes," she went on rapidly, "I knew you would come back, but I did not reckon it would be so soon."

"It is six years, eight months and fourteen days," he remarked. "Quite long enough."

"Six years?" she repeated, "only six years, and I——" She rose and scanned him, eagerly taking in every detail, the touch of grey in his hair at the temples, the lines about his mouth, the worn serge suit, the baggy knees of his trousers. "Dick, have you had any luck?"

A gleam lit up his eyes. He drew a chair up to the little table, produced a small leather wallet, from which he took out a five-hundred-dollar note. "Do you remember that?" he asked. "The last time that I saw you, you lent me that——"

"And you've never used it," she interrupted reproachfully. "Why, it's the very note I gave you, and it was my last—the last that father——" She straightened herself with a proud gesture.

"No, it was not your father's," he corrected, and she flashed a look at him in which the seven past years and more were concentrated. "No," he added, "I've not used it. I've kept it, kept it from that day to this."

"And you've come back to return it. You always were cruelly independent, Dick."

"No, not to return it. That note's mine, Kitty, and I don't part with it. But I've come back to repay it—with interest, compound interest, by God!" He rose with a dry laugh. "If you want a house on Fifth Avenue, or on any Fifth Avenue in any city you please, you've only to ask for it right now."

"Dick!" She faced him, half-sceptical, half-pleading. "For Heaven's sake don't play with me."

"The clothes are troubling you," he chuckled. "They're the clothes, of course, you last saw me in. I've kept them too, and I put them on this morning so that you might recognise me more easily. But what I say is true, true as gospel, and I've come back to take you away, out of this one-horse lodging. You and I are going to begin to live—to live." He put a strong, affectionate hand on her shoulder.

She was crying softly in her joy. "I knew you would," she murmured through her tears. "I always said you would, and you have. Oh, Dick, I am so proud and happy! Tell me, tell me all."

"That would be a long yarn and it will keep. But I've worked"—he passed his hand through his hair and his jaw seemed to grow stiff—"yes, I've worked, and the luck's been on my side, the devil's luck of those who must swim or sink." He sat down and his fingers drummed on the table. "Do you remember John P. Steer?" he asked suddenly—"that lean, pasty-faced, pot-bellied Boss, who, because he had been told it was Bismarck's recipe, always drank Moët and Chandon mixed with stout when he dined with that scraggy, golden-haired maypole in Number Three on the first floor at the end of the passage——"

"John P. Steer, the aluminium king, do I remember? He'd the worst eyes of any man in Wall Street."

"That's right. Well, that was the beginning after you

left. I broke him—yes, I broke John P. Steer. I twisted his aluminium crown into chips not fit even for the hairpins of the maypole. Aluminium Amalgamated," he gurgled grimly, "the fledglings still talk about it, the Aluminium Amalgamated Syndicate of Richard Forster, of whom no one but you and I had even heard. A ramp they called it, but John P. Steer doesn't drink any more champagne in Number Three. I took a million dollars out of him and his crew."

"Dick!"

"There were others in with me, of course," he explained half-regretfully, "whose names didn't appear in the shop windows, and that time, the first time, they scooped the biggest share of the pickings. But Aluminium Amalgamated put me on my feet, both feet at once, and copper and diamonds have done the rest."

"Copper and diamonds!" she repeated as if she were listening to a fairy tale.

"Did you ever hear of the Blue Paradise Mines? No, of course you haven't. Well, they're pretty well owned—controlled's the correct word—by Richard Forster. Diamonds," he added thoughtfully, "are a necessity to women and copper to men. Copper, too, is a darned sight dearer than it was seven years ago and it won't get any cheaper. Some say Richard Forster is responsible for that; perhaps they're right. That's the story, Kitty, anyway, and now," he threw up his head, "you and I are going to begin to live."

"You?—yes." She walked to the window looking out on the back-yard and stood in silence, while her fingers played unconsciously with the wedding-ring. Forster noted with a calm satisfaction that her figure was as straight and supple as in the days of her girlhood. "You?—yes," she repeated over her shoulder, "but me?—that's another matter. You've forgotten Tom."

"No." He rose sharply. "No, I have something to say to Tom, and the sooner it's said the better."

"Dick," she began pleadingly.

"And I must see Tom now, at once." He walked up to the window and looked out.

"Ah, I see he's just the same as he was, rather more so in fact."

"Yes, he's just the same, only more so," she echoed. "Deal gently with him, Dick; you will deal gently with him, for my sake?"

His eyes had grown very hard. "For your sake," he said, "I'm going to deal very gently with him,—as gently as I can."

She was trying to read his thoughts. A vague fear crept across her face. "Dick," she began, "you know something."

"Send him here," was all he said, and without a word she left the room.

When the door opened again, the appearance of the man who sauntered in explained plainer than speech the pathos that had vibrated in Mrs. Hennessy's voice. This was a man, born a gentleman, who ought to have been in the prime of life; but in every line of a face that had once been handsome, and in the slouching figure that had once been virile and muscular, could be read one dominating, damning fact—drink.

"So you've come back, Forster," he said, holding out a hand.

"Yes,"—the hand, however, was not taken—"yes, I've come back."

"And as cursedly proud as you always were. Kitty said you had something to say to me. What is it?"

"Only this. To-morrow a boat leaves Southampton for Buenos Ayres. There's a first-class berth taken in it for the name of Thomas Hennessy. I shall see you into that first-class berth. At Buenos Ayres you will be met. Five minutes before the boat leaves I shall give you thirty-five pounds, and on the first of each month, from to-day, you will be paid thirty-five pounds." The other laughed

loudly. "Buenos Ayres," Forster went on, "is quite a decent place. There are plenty of men and women there, of all sorts, and drink is cheap and good."

"And what am I going to do in Buenos Ayres," Tom asked sarcastically, "on thirty-five pounds a month?"

"Anything you please, provided you don't leave it."

Hennessy bowed. "Kitty goes with me, of course?" he inquired politely. "Will she have thirty-five pounds a month too?"

Forster put down the cheap vase he was examining. "Kitty," he answered, "will stay here."

"Ah! I see. You are going to take Kitty away, but not," he laughed, "not to Buenos Ayres."

"What Kitty is going to do and what I am going to do will henceforth be no concern of yours."

"Never again?"

"Never again."

Hennessy laughed. Then he poured out a wineglassful of whisky and commenced to sip it. As Forster said nothing, he lit his pipe defiantly and walked up to him. "And supposing," he remarked, "I refuse to do what you say?"

Forster's cold eyes rested on him in a menacing silence, and Tom visibly winced. "And supposing," Tom repeated with an oath, "that I refuse, as I do?"

"Then," came the quiet reply, "I shall bring in a third party—Alice Powers."

The tumbler of whisky dropped on the floor and broke. Tom, with quivering fingers, took his pipe from his mouth. It dropped too, and its owner was staring with twitching lips at the impassive man who confronted him.

Two or three oaths ripped angrily out. His hands clenched.

"I won't go!" he snarled; "do you hear—I will not go?"

"Either you will go, as I say," Forster answered composedly, "in which case not a word more will be said by

me, or——" he paused suggestively. "But whether you go, or whether you stay, makes no difference to Kitty or to me. The only difference is for you, if you go. You can make up your mind while I finish a cigarette."

He struck a match deliberately and began to smoke, the other watching him with a curious mixture of fear and hatred. The two were about the same age and the contrast between the energy under restraint of the one and the wrecked manhood of the other, between the self-made, self-trained successful financier and the dissipated self-ruined gentleman, in this back parlour of a lodging house, was painfully dramatic and complete. Forster's personality dominated the silence of the room and seemed to paralyse with a familiar spell the remnant of will that gentle blood was striving to assert.

"Well?" Forster threw the stump of his cigarette into the fireplace.

"I go," the other growled sullenly.

Forster nodded as if he had expected the answer and buttoned up his coat.

"But," Hennessy flashed out, "if you imagine you've done for me you are mistaken. Other men besides yourself can come back."

"Men come back," was the answer, "either because it is their duty or because they hope that the past promises them a pleasant future; otherwise they are wise to stay away."

"Ah!" Tom shook an impotent fist. "Some day I'll have it back, back with interest—back from you and back from Kitty, but from Kitty first, and from Kitty last."

Forster's anger flamed up. He gripped the other's arm almost savagely. "You miserable cur!" he said in a low voice of infinite contempt, "you miserable cur! Bah! when I think of what you deserve, I could pitch you into that court through the closed window."

But it was not till he had mastered himself that he en-

tered the kitchen, where the woman he called Kitty was waiting anxiously.

"Tom and I," he said quite coolly, "have arranged our business. He goes to Buenos Ayres to-morrow—no, I tell you nothing and you must ask no questions at present. What he wants for his journey you can get with these"—he laid some crisp notes on the dresser. Her face was eloquent with unuttered thoughts and queries, but she had already discovered that the man who had come back had in no way changed from the man of seven years ago. "Do the students who lodge here," he asked, after a pause, "require you to cook their dinner?"

"Both my gentlemen are dining in college to-night."

"Good! then you shall dine with me at my hotel. I will call for you at seven-fifteen."

"But, Dick, I can't dine with you in this"—she indicated her worn black dress and apron—"and it's all I have."

"I have thought of that. There's a dinner-dress and some other things on its way to you from Bond Street——"

"What do you mean?" She laid a frightened hand on his arm.

"I ordered them a week ago, when I had at last found out where you were. They cabled the measurement from the place in New York where you used to have your dresses made, before——" he stopped. "It won't take you an hour to make any alterations that are necessary after seven years."

"But you can't dine at a swell hotel with a lodging-house keeper—no! no, Dick."

"They won't know you in a low-necked dress, and even if they did, I should like to see them object to a friend of mine. My stars!"—his eyes gleamed, then his voice suddenly softened—"you used to look very nice in a low-necked dress, Kitty, and it's time you were seen in one again. Seven-fifteen—and don't keep me waiting longer than you can help."

She accepted meekly. And truth to tell, for the moment she was only thinking of the dinner-dress.

"'And what are you going to do for the rest of the day?" she asked. "There's no Blue Paradise Mine or Amalgamated Aluminium in Oxford."

"There's something better," he replied, smiling—and his smile was wonderfully winning, "after lunch, I'm going to make the officials in the Bodleian Library sit up." Kitty fairly gasped with astonishment. "Education," he added, "is a necessity, when you wish to begin to live. I've not had much time for the frills and trimmings of civilisation so far, but I guess this moth-eaten mediæval museum can teach me, if any place can, where to get the material and how to cut it—the beginning of it, anyway." At the door he turned back. "I was forgetting," he said, with a curious shyness; "the key of the box that's coming down for you is in this."

Kitty found herself with a small leather case in her hand and the kitchen empty. She was too bewildered by the events of the morning to think. She was only conscious that, in the most marvellous way, her life had suddenly been wrenched back into intimate connection with a dead and buried past, and that the future would start not from to-day, but from the point at which it had abruptly stopped before—and then, as Dick had done, she refused to complete the sentence. Was that possible? If it could only be true! Ah, if it could only be true! But—her hands dropped helplessly into her lap, her eyes gazed at the dresser and the cheap china—it was not true and it could not be true. Whatever the future brought of pleasure and pain, of life in all its fulness for a woman who was still young, still beautiful, never ceasing to vibrate, with the passionate desire to escape from the prison of poverty that choked and starved and warped—yes, whatever the future brought, she would enter on the enjoyment of its gifts fettered by the legacy of the past. Behind each step on the new road stalked the

ghosts of the dead forgotten acts of the seven years now ended, of the seven years before they had begun. Dick who bid her come back to his new world to-day, free—free!—was only unlocking the gates of a prison cruelly real, whose iron had not merely entered into the soul, but was written in a woman's record that could not be erased.

And then her foot kicked against the little leather case that had dropped from fingers twisted in the misery of her thoughts. She stopped and opened it mechanically and a sparkle lit up the dingy little kitchen—a sparkle not from the key but from the diamond pendant beside which it lay. "My God!" she sobbed. For she had recognised the jewel. It had been hers once. Six years, eight months and sixteen days ago she had pawned this pendant, her sole remaining trinket, for a five-hundred-dollar note, that same note that now reposed in the wallet of the man who had come back.

CHAPTER II

IN THE SHADOW OF THE BODLEIAN

RICHARD FORSTER had descended from the Bodleian Library and was standing in the School's Quadrangle, staring absently at the noble Tower of the Five Orders. The afternoon sunlight which left half of the great court in shadow and lapped in mysterious repose the entrance to the Proscholium, the cloistered quiet of this superb monument to the simple truth that man cannot live by bread alone, had stimulated a meditative mood. That the frills and trimmings of civilisation were a necessity, he had long admitted. That all knowledge, even the knowledge of the mere bookworm, could mean power, he had always most firmly believed, and his own career had strengthened the belief. But the Bodleian to-day had thrust upon him two new and disquieting thoughts; first, that to acquire the knowledge of a cultivated intellect might be beyond his abilities because it presupposed intellectual habits and a mental training of a peculiar kind, that were assuredly not his at present; and, secondly, that even if he succeeded in acquiring them, their value would be determined by the quality of spirit in the mind that possessed them. The refined, the educated mind, which his wealth and leisure were to provide, was not the sum of the things it might know, but an attitude towards life based upon that sum. That the value and power of knowledge were necessarily far more intimately connected with character and the ideals to which character alone can give strength, colour and comfort was a revolutionary element in his theory of life; and Dick, with his hands in his pockets and his penetrating eyes fixed on the sunlight bathing those pillared arches on the Tower, was endeavouring to wrest

an answer from the stimulating silence of the stones. But the stones had no answer save that the new ideas might dislocate and put wholly out of gear the machinery that had hitherto worked so well. In fact, as Dick was putting it to himself, he might be required to scrap the whole of his mental plant, without any prospect of replacing it by more efficient machinery. Life had been the constructive and working engineer of the past—Life alone could be the inventive engineer for this future that he demanded but could not define.

Two fashionably-dressed women had strayed into the quadrangle from the Proscholium and glanced inquiringly round with the patronising air of the intelligent tourist. Then the elder one advanced smilingly.

"It is Mr. Forster," she said, and Dick turned round impatiently. "I am right, am I not?"—she held out a finely gloved hand. "You have forgotten me, though we crossed in the *Campania* with you three months ago. You have probably also forgotten my daughter. Let me reintroduce you. Gertrude, you remember Mr. Forster?"

"Perfectly." The young lady turned lazily from an inspection of the architecture. She did not remember, but what else can a self-possessed, well-trained daughter say under such circumstances?

"And to think we should meet again in this delightful city!" Mrs. Wyatt pursued. "I had no idea you cared for all this sort of thing." She waved her hand amiably first at the Tower, and then at the Great Gateway of the Schools.

Dick had bowed rather coldly, but he still said nothing.

"Mr. Forster," the young lady remarked, "you may remember, mamma, said as little to the ladies at sea as he does now to ladies on land. They didn't interest him so much as—this sort of thing."

"Probably"—Dick met her demure glance with an answering glance of spirit—"because he did not interest them."

"That is a fair repartee, but is it quite true?"

"In what way was I interesting to you, Miss Wyatt?" he demanded calmly.

She laughed. "You deserve to be told, and you shall. A malicious wag on board said you were amalgamated aluminium, and the one woman to whom you once spoke persuaded us that he must be wrong because you really were much heavier and duller than aluminium had any right to be."

"My dear Gertrude!" her mother protested.

"Aluminium," he replied to the daughter, "particularly when amalgamated, is a very deceptive metal. But it doesn't matter, for I am copper now, not aluminium."

"Copper is really heavy, isn't it?—though it can be bright also," she retorted.

"Yes, it can be very heavy, as Nature has made it particularly capable of standing the strain of all kinds of sparks and shocks."

They both laughed, and Mrs. Wyatt hastily interposed with an apology, coupling it with a desire that he would seek reparation at their flat in London some day, to all of which Dick listened with puzzling gravity.

"Oughtn't you," Miss Gertrude enquired, "oughtn't you to write the address down on your shirt-cuff? It would be politer. You can always then lay the blame for forgetting on your laundress."

For answer Dick pulled back the scanty sleeve of his worn serge coat so as to reveal the cuff of a flannel shirt on his powerful wrist. "I must trust to my memory," he said pleasantly, adding as the two women moved away: "besides, I never write down the things I wish to remember, only the things I wish to forget."

Miss Gertrude listened with composure to her mother's expostulations. "Is he really aluminium and copper too?" she interrupted, as she always did the dribbling cascade of criticism.

"Yes, yes, of course—aluminium and copper and half a

dozen other things too. He could endow a university, probably, and never know that he had done it. Why were you so rude to him?—what do his clothes matter?"

"I didn't particularly notice his clothes, except that they seemed to suit him. A man should look what he is, and Mr. Forster looks it."

"My dearest Gertrude, when will you learn that these self-made *nouveaux riches* resent pert persiflage?"

"That's nonsense, mamma. Mr. Forster, if he is a millionaire, is sick to death, I'm sure, of being made love to at first sight by every girl who wants a rich husband. Mr. Forster rather liked my cheek."

"He won't call," her mother replied sadly. "I am certain he won't call now."

"Of course not. He wouldn't call if you and I knelt down on our knees to him on these mediæval cobbly stones. Self-made copper doesn't call. It expects those who covet it to dig it up for themselves."

"And when and how do you propose to dig it up in this case?" Mrs. Wyatt demanded with maternal sarcasm.

"We'll see. He's staying at our hotel. I saw his name in the book and enjoyed his picturesque back at lunch in that weird coffin of a coffee-room, and I was wondering all the time where I had seen before such an aggravating back. Ah!" She paused in front of the iron gate of All Souls to look in, and her fine grey eyes surveyed the cool expanse of lawn lying in sunlit dignity and unruffled repose under Hawkesmoor's Twin Towers. "Ah! I should like to have a house with a front court like that, and instead I am condemned to a flat on a third floor in a fashionable street of provincial Mayfair! The next time that Fate, mamma, thrusts Mr. Forster into your lap, I shall remember seriously that daughters are ciphers, to be seen but not heard. That will please you and perhaps it will annoy Mr. Forster."

Mrs. Wyatt was not interested in the stately beauty and peace of these academic quadrangles. "I wish," she said,

with petulant irrelevance, "he would get a new suit of clothes."

"It's only a subtle form of swagger," Gertrude replied. "Mr. Forster's dowdy suit is less objectionable vulgarity than if he wore a diamond tie-pin and made his valet iron his trousers. If I were a dramatist, I should make him the hero of a really problematic problem play. The only man that is worth a girl's serious consideration is the man with a past. That is why young men are merely fit to flirt with."

"Gertrude!" Mrs. Wyatt was genuinely shocked. Her ambition had been to make this handsome daughter a modern of the moderns, and from time to time the ambition realised itself in the most uncomfortable way.

"The past, of course, is quite unimportant," the girl pursued. "That is where the hero of the problem play differs from the heroine. The past invariably strangles the woman, but makes the man. The men with a past are the only men who have a future."

"You are a very strange girl," her mother said helplessly, after a pause. "You read far too much."

"My dear mamma," Gertrude replied, "when you were a girl you thought a great deal about men; girls to-day read about them to avoid thinking. The game is the same. Setting up in pinafores and short frocks ideals, like ninepins, that you may have the fun of bowling them over when you put your hair up. But I am quite willing to give up the reading and take to the thinking."

Meanwhile, Dick, who had watched them sail out into the square, was still rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Ah!" he remarked at last, "Amalgamated Aluminium—what ho!"

That evening, at an early dinner, Miss Gertrude was distinctly disappointed. Mr. Forster was not in the dining-room. She lingered over her meal until her mother's patience wore out, and then, to her annoyance as they left the room he suddenly entered, accompanied by a woman,

and took his place at a reserved table. "Quite pretty and charmingly dressed," was Mrs. Wyatt's comment in the drawing-room.

"Yes"—Gertrude shot a glance at the mirror—"Copper has better taste than aluminium. I wonder," she added, taking up the *Gentlewoman*, "whether that was the past, the present or the future."

Downstairs Dick was conscious that he had predicted rightly. Certainly no one would have recognised in his guest the landlady of the morning, and Kitty herself, perhaps, had been as much surprised as anyone at the transformation. Seven years of poverty and struggle, of cheap clothes and a drink-sodden husband, had almost made her forget that Nature had given, and not taken away, a tall and finely-moulded figure, a marvellously brilliant and delicate complexion, the charm of feature that in happier days had proved so fatal, and hair that was the envy of every woman who saw it—the hair that artists dream of and to which no palette can do justice. When she stood in front of her dingy mirror in the new dress, she had uttered a cry of sheer joy. True, it was singularly simple and quiet—too simple and quiet, she thought at first. Kitty's own taste was natural, not educated, but after a sharp struggle she had, with a sigh, taken off the diamond pendant, recognising instinctively that it introduced a jarring note of vulgarity. And now as she sat in the softly-lit dining-room, amongst men and women of a world from which she had been excluded for seven cruel years, the exhilaration that she felt in her gown and her bare shoulders showed itself in the brilliance of her Irish eyes. Away with the cowardly forebodings of midday! Life was really and truly beginning again—that pulsing, vivid, satisfying life for which her emotional nature so passionately yearned.

Forster deliberately let her talk, listening with encouraging sympathy to the story that she had to tell, seeing the woman of the morning slowly vanish and the beautiful,

impulsive girl come slowly and triumphantly back. It was not until dinner was nearly over that Kitty became aware that Dick had said absolutely nothing.

"Mercy!" she said, "I came out to hear you and I know as little as I did when you left me this morning."

"There is nothing more to confess," Dick replied. "I have become rich: that is my seven years."

"But has nothing else happened?"

"Nothing."

Kitty's eyes swept over him. "This morning," she said, with a curious awe in her voice, "I thought you were just the same as ever you were. I am the same woman, but you——. No, you are not the man you were."

"Perhaps not. I hope not."

The slow admission set Kitty studying him afresh, and her awe increased. The contrast between the man who sat in front of her and the man of the shabby serge suit was even more striking than the contrast between the landlady in a soiled apron and this brilliant beauty so faultlessly dressed. But what impressed her was the power stamped on his face, so amply compensating for the absence of the hall-mark of birth. Power? No, something finer and rarer than power, an unanalysable distinction, arresting the notice of a woman above all, and deserving to do so. This was a man who had had victorious intercourse with great affairs, with the men of great affairs, the men who think in continents, and the intercourse had blended into his face and bearing a sovereign alchemy of character, ambition and command.

"Dick," she said, with a thrill of enthusiasm, "you tell me you have become a rich man. But I know now you are going to be a great one."

"That," he answered, "remains to be seen. Yet," he added, "you are wrong in one thing. You are not the woman you were."

She looked up at him somewhat frightened. "What do you mean?" she demanded with defiant timidity.

Dick selected a cigarette before he answered. "Seven years," he said quietly, "may be nothing to a young man; they can never be nothing to a girl."

"Of course, I can never be a girl again," she replied, with a swift note of concentrated passion, "never again the girl I was—once. But you needn't fling that in my teeth, Dick. It is cruel."

"I didn't mean that," he answered soothingly. "Even if I could, I wouldn't have you the girl you were—once. But you are a woman now; that is what I meant."

"A woman?—yes," she echoed bitterly. "It's a mighty poor thing to be if it takes such a seven years to make the woman I am and have been."

"There are plenty who would envy you if they saw you now; there will be more when they see you a year or two hence. You can't take away the seven years, true, but you can—you shall—wipe out the things that have hurt. That's what my money is going to do." He smiled and gently patted her hand.

"But why spend your money on me? Am I really worth it?"

"You made me," he replied simply, "and now I'm going to remake you. No, no, it wasn't that five-hundred-dollar note: it was your belief in me, in my future, in my power to save myself—a girl's belief—the girl who was my only friend. Pay me back, Kitty, now by believing in yourself—a woman's belief in a woman, which is one of the few great things in this world."

Her eyes filled with tears. "If I only could," she whispered; "but sometimes it is too late for a woman to believe in herself."

"Never—never!"

"And if I try, Dick, will you stand by me to the end?" She raised her head proudly and looked round the empty room. The radiancy and innocence of girlhood seemed for the moment to throw a halo on her face.

"To the end."

He held out his cool, strong hand, and she clapsed it fervently, and thus was the compact made. And when they left the table it was to talk prosaically of plans and dates, of pounds, shillings and pence, of London and the new life.

"Let us go back on foot," Dick suggested later, and they walked together in silence down the deserted High Street, turned into St. Mary's Entry, and began to cross Radcliffe Square.

"Dick!" Kitty exclaimed suddenly, "isn't it lovely? Do you know I never thought Oxford lovely till to-night."

"Yes," he answered, "there's not much wrong with this place."

None but the blind, indeed, could have remained unmoved by the solemnity, tender yet austere, of the beauty of the scene. You may search in vain through the cities of Europe for a square that can surpass in the magic of its atmosphere and dignity what the Radcliffe Square can offer on a moonlit night in spring. Mark how from meadows and gardens at hand the ambrosial breeze of May blows with lilac, laburnum and limes, and the coming hawthorn in its breath; how the moonlight silhouettes in shadows of silver and deep violet the massive block of the Bodleian, the flowering chestnut above, the garden wall of Exeter, the battlemented front of Brasenose, the spire of St. Mary's, while it flings from the noble dome in the centre a diapered sheet of whispering light across the piazza colonnade of All Souls into the august silence of that lonely quadrangle. Air and moonlight, shadows and storied buildings, can always murmur in listening ears the glamour of romance when Spring invites the night to sleep and dream beneath her unfolded wings; but here in this square in Oxford the vault of deep azure sky, the moonlight and the shadows are surely touched by a rarer and more mysterious quality than the siren call to love in the earth's new birth. The harmony and hope of the future enter by a mystic communion into the historic legacy

of the past, and the sensuous beauty of light and line is transfigured into majestic symbols of an infinite realm of the unseen, the ghostly kingdom of the spirits of all those who in the past, for the truth's sake, have aspired and striven; of all the brother spirits on earth who, to-day and in the future, will, because they must, aspire and strive for the rewards of the spirit, never refused to those that seek aright. This is the beauty that does not enchant; it is the beauty that purifies and exalts by a silence diviner than music, by a fear more imperious than death.

"We cannot talk here," Dick said, and Kitty, who had stood entranced, finding simply in what she saw the answering echo to the passionate desire for life throbbing in her blood, reluctantly followed him.

"Dick"—she laid a hand on his arm when they had passed out of the square—"you have told me what I am to do, but you have not told me what you are going to do."

He pressed his lips together. "I knew this morning," he answered after a pause, "but I don't know now."

"Then have you changed your mind to-day?" she asked, astonished.

His eye ran along the broken line of Broad Street. "Yes," he said slowly. "This amazing city has simply turned my mind into a confounded chaos. I couldn't have believed it possible."

"But have you no plan?" she persisted, with growing perplexity.

"Of course I have a plan. That's not the difficulty."

Kitty's foot tapped meditatively on the cobbled stones. "You will marry, I suppose," she suggested in a low voice.

He searched her face as for an answer. "I don't think so," he startled her by replying. "A wife is not necessary for real living; at least," he added, almost to himself, "the women I can marry I don't want to marry, and the women I might wish to marry would probably—certainly, rather—refuse."

"That's nonsense," she said indignantly. "You could make any woman you choose your wife."

Dick's lips twisted sceptically. "Ah," he replied, in his deepest tones. "But I don't want to make a woman my wife: I want a woman to make me her husband."

Kitty rippled into laughter. "There are thousands waiting to do that," she said, "thousands."

"I suppose so, because, poor fools, they don't understand what I want. How can they when I don't know it myself."

CHAPTER III

BASIC THOUGHTS

GERTRUDE WYATT was taking the pins out of her hat when she stopped to utter an impatient exclamation. "That ass of a girl has let in a visitor," she muttered angrily. But when the "ass of a girl" came with precise information, the young lady accepted it without a rebuke. Instead, she went back to the mirror and surveyed herself in the hat—a veritable triumph from Paris. Then she tried the effect without the hat and smilingly walked into the drawing-room bareheaded.

"You have not forgotten, after all," was her greeting. "Mamma will be very sorry to have missed you. She always maintains I had frightened you away."

"Is that why you are not at home?" Richard Forster asked. "The maid said so, but as I had seen you enter I insisted I knew better. I saw you at the concert, and my motor was just behind your hansom."

"So you were at the concert?" She walked across the room, conscious that her morning ride was still helping her to look her best. "Education or amusement?"

"Both."

"That is very serious. I chaperoned mamma, because she and I dine with very brainy people to-night, philanthropists and lady novelists, long-haired men and short-haired women, and short hair in her sex always gives mamma aphasia. Let me confess, it's appalling, Mr. Forster, to discover at the fish that your parent has exhausted her vocabulary and has nothing to talk about but her one and only daughter. So I take care to provide her with conundrums beforehand. In the drawing-room the

way of escape is all that matters, and"—she glanced round the room—"mamma is thoroughly good at her exits."

"But I imagined Mrs. Wyatt approved of the modern in everything."

"Not in music, for music and morals go together. Mamma, I must warn you, holds they both went to the bad when Rossini died, and there's only been a sham resurrection when comic opera was transformed into musical comedy—the tunes of the Middle Victorian Age, like a leg of stale colonial mutton minced into a curry, the old meat made worse by a dyspeptic condiment."

Dick took his cup of tea, studying in silence his young hostess, the flush in whose cheeks subtly heightened the grey eyes under their long lashes.

"And how is the education getting on?" she inquired.

"Excellently, thank you. It would get on even better if London would let me alone."

"London women," she replied, "I agree, are a frightful nuisance. But I don't gather they have been very successful with Mr. Forster. I never see him anywhere."

"Not even at concerts, though I was only two rows away." She accepted the retort with a charming smile of penitence. "But I gathered you were enjoying it."

"Sinfully," she answered. "I was so tonicked up at school with the classical—Brahms to Beethoven and Bach—that now I am cursed with a passion for the naked barbaric, the noble savage Slav. If the composer ends in 'owsky' or 'anoff,' then he's all right. You see, it's the only chance the *jeune fille* is allowed by civilisation to gloat unreproved in her most primitive instincts without being condemned as sentimental or mannish. And you?"

Dick took another piece of bread and butter and their eyes met. "I am learning to prefer," he said, surveying the finely-chiselled regularity of her features and the severely simple lines of her dress, "to prefer the classic, alike in art, in music, and in men and women."

"I wonder," she answered composedly, "if the taste will last."

He took up a book whose title had caught his eye. "What is this?" he inquired.

"You may well ask," she replied, smiling. "It's mamma's new religion. Did you ever indulge in Basic Thoughts? If not, don't. Mamma has fallen among the quacks—I beg their pardon, the priests—and she has roped me in. We go once a week in our best hats and frocks to the latest fraud, a perfumed professor in an immaculate frockcoat who teaches his system at tea-time to a gang of would-be smart girls and disillusioned young wives. The system is not a substitute for, but a supplement to, the Christianity of the *chic*, a sort of pick-me-up smelling bottle, in fact, easily fastened to a bijou edition of the prayer-book, and more pungent than it looks, though it's psychically antiseptic. That is all explained in the preface. When you get up in the morning and when you go to bed at night you swallow a Basic Thought. The professor supplies the thought and the eternal woman does the rest. That book in your hands contains a double dose for a whole year; it's a perfect pantry of meaty bits from the metaphysicians, Plato to Nietzsche, cold-stored and completely deodorised. As far as I can understand, it's simply a dodge for giving you Licence and calling it Law. It's amazingly popular with my sex in consequence. Try one now—any page of the book will do."

"I'm not taking any," he said. "I find it difficult enough to understand the old religion without any professorial embroideries."

Gertrude leaned back on the sofa and looked at him. "You are interested in religion?" she inquired, after a pause.

He put down his cup and walked to the hearthrug, where he was close to her. "I have a theory," he said quite gravely, "that the man who understands religion will

have found a clue to the other great problem of the world —Woman."

The girl glanced for a moment at the toe of her slipper, then she looked up at him. "Most men think that, I fancy," she answered, "because they don't understand that both religion and women are sphinxes without secrets. But," she rose, "I am surprised you haven't discovered it already. Yet I suppose if woman hadn't a secret, man would find it necessary to invent one for her."

"And religion?" Dick, and she knew it, was measuring her mind as his eyes unconsciously measured her fine figure.

"Does its value lie in its having a secret?" she retorted. "I hope not. Things that contain a secret are only valuable until the secret is discovered. And then——" she shrugged her shoulders.

"I must think about that before I agree," he replied, taking up his hat. At the door she stopped him. "Do you ever dance?" she asked lightly. "No? That is a pity. Mamma is giving a dance on my birthday next week. Would you come if she sent you a card? Perhaps? For an hour about supper-time? Men are at their best, are they not, about supper-time?"

In the street Dick sent his motor away. He wanted to walk, for he wanted to think. And this evening he walked slowly and aimlessly, taking his turns at random. It was barely two months since he had seen the steamer carry away Tom Hennessy, and had wrestled with the new ideas that Oxford had so strangely thrust upon him. When he had first returned to London, a rich man, his ambition had been simple and definite enough. A big house in London, a big house in the country, the society of the rich and the well-born, just enough work as just enough exercise, to keep himself physically and mentally in perfect health—that was the programme. Presently he would marry for beauty and position, not for love, from among the well-born; presently, again, he would win a peerage

perhaps, and end by founding a line. His wealth, in brief, was to confer what the favoured few inherited by birth—the right to enjoy, just as he pleased, in the company of the refined and governing class to whom pleasure was not a right but an ordinance of the nature of things. Oxford, most unexpectedly, had made sad havoc of this vision. It had with incredible relentlessness torn the picture to pieces. But it had failed to supply a picture of its own.

Forster had come back to London convinced merely of the hopeless vulgarity, the unsatisfying character, of the dream he had intended to realise. During the two months that had followed, instead of grasping eagerly at the countless invitations showered on a wealthy bachelor who had powerful friends amongst the great financiers, he had gone daily to his office and worked harder even than he had worked when he broke the Aluminium King and secured the control of the Blue Paradise Concession. His evenings were devoted to a new kind of severe mental toil, to delving into the literature of knowledge, to the education that he had so long planned. Mrs. Wyatt's drawing-room in Mayfair was, in fact, the only one that he had entered spontaneously, and his motive had been a pure whim. For it was not Gertrude's handsome face and figure, but her cleverness, waking in him a vague curiosity to penetrate the veil of polished flippancy, that had brought him from the concert where he had unexpectedly seen her to the door of her flat. He came away to-day with the curiosity deepened. Gertrude, that afternoon, had swiftly, seductively and insidiously woven herself into the formative process, and thrown, as only a woman's personality can, an interesting conundrum into the problem of the future. Perhaps she—— Someone called to him softly. Dick looked up, and to his surprise found himself in the Park by the railings.

"Why, it's Kitty," he said with genuine pleasure.

"If you knew anything about Kitty," she rebuked, "you

would know she is always here between five and six-thirty. Do you like your horses, Dick?"

He eyed the luxurious victoria, the handsome bays, the coachman and footman with amusement. Could this dainty lady, reclining amongst her cushions, really be the landlady of two months ago?

"Living suits you," he said, "by Jove! it does. You look as if you had never done anything else than drive amongst these pampered aristocrats all your life."

"It suits me right enough," she answered gaily. "I'm getting the hang of the thing by degrees. At present the spectators think I'm an actress or something of that sort. Next year perhaps they'll mistake me for a lady. I wonder." She laughed happily. "Meanwhile I'm having a thumping time."

"That's right."

"Aren't you going to drive with me?" But Dick shook his head. "You never come to see me. What is the matter?"

"The matter? Nothing. I'm having a thumping time also, too much so to let me see anybody, even you, Kitty."

"But, Dick, really you're a beast not to let me enjoy myself sometimes with you. How can a woman really live by herself?"

"You will make friends," he said, "and it is better for you at present that I should not come to see you."

"Friends!" Kitty cried with scorn. "Oh, yes, I'm making friends, and am I to lose meanwhile the one man who is worth all London put together? Dick, you do everything for me. If you won't let me do anything for you, you might at least let me sometimes give you a cup of your own tea."

"Some day I shall ask you to do much more," he replied quietly.

Kitty's eyes rested on his face, but there was nothing to be read in its perplexing impassiveness. "Have you fallen in love yet?" she asked lightly. "Have you

found the woman who is willing to make you her husband?"

"That is just the question I was asking myself," he replied, "when you called to me."

"I thought as much," she said quite gravely. Then she leaned forward. "For God's sake, take care, Dick," she whispered. "I am bound to lose you some day, but I don't want to lose you to the wrong woman."

He laughed. "I can take care of myself," he said. "You had much better pray for the woman, Kitty, whoever she is."

She shrank at the pitiless speech. This flash from the old Dick, so strangely out of harmony with the man beside her, was lacerating in its ambitious egoism.

"If you mean what you say," she said, "then——" she stopped. "But you don't—you don't."

"Perhaps I do, perhaps I don't."

And they parted, Forster watching her drive away into the throng of carriages and motors with a dry smile lingering at the corners of his mouth, while Kitty leaned back, one hand tightly grasping her parasol, the other clenched in her lap; and she was still lost in her thoughts when the carriage was halted by the usual block at the Marble Arch. Suddenly she sat up and looked almost in fear about her. Amidst the foot passengers waiting to follow the carriages out, her gaze fell on a tall man, bronzed by the sun of the tropics, who was chatting carelessly to a lad of perhaps twenty. It was the sunburnt man's voice that had accidentally startled her, and involuntarily she put her parasol between them. He apparently had been startled too, for the lad at his side had to repeat his question without receiving his answer, and then he innocently followed his companion's look.

"By Jove, Guy," she heard the boy say, "what a lovely face!"

The policeman outside raised his arm, and the pent-up carriages poured into Oxford Street. Whether "Guy"

made any reply Kitty did not hear, for when she had recovered her equanimity her victoria had left the pair half a mile behind.

Just about the same time Gertrude Wyatt was putting down her book to greet her mother. "I have added to my birthday party," she said, "a caller who came to see you."

"Anybody interesting?" Mrs. Wyatt was tired, and Gertrude's cool restfulness was a trifle irritating.

"Only Mr. Forster."

Mrs. Wyatt sat down in sheer amazement. "Mr. Forster?" she repeated—"Mr. Forster has been here and is coming to the dance?"

"Yes. He believes, poor man, that the dance will be interesting, but I am not at all sure that he will find it so."

The mother looked at the daughter with a curious mixture of pride, perplexity and helplessness. "That will depend on you, Gertrude," she said.

"I suppose so. That is what makes it a riddle now for me, perhaps a riddle without an answer for Mr. Forster."

Mrs. Wyatt rose with decision. "I shall ask him," she said, "to dine with us before——"

Gertrude had shut the volume of poetry with a snap. "Certainly not, mamma," she pronounced; "that will not do at all. You have already asked Teddy Holford and that handsome popinjay in the Guards, whose name I forget. Why spoil my party by lugging in Mr. Forster? And now you must go and dress. Whittaker has been down three times to know whether you are in, and if she interrupts me again I shall be obliged to give her a month's notice."

She calmly took her mother away, and had you been able, later, to watch the anxious Whittaker preparing her young mistress's hair for the novelists and philanthropists, you might have noticed that Gertrude sat at the dressing-table as usual with a volume of poetry—Euripides on this

occasion, as it often was—in front of her, but though the maid was necessarily slow, the page of the Greek text was not turned, which was unusual. Whittaker, too, noticed the fact and drew various conclusions of her own, for she was aware, of course, that Mr. Forster had called and that his call had been preceded by a still more unusual fact—one of Miss Gertrude's best hats lying on the floor.

Gertrude's expectation that Mr. Forster would come to the dance was fulfilled, though it was midnight before he shook hands with Mrs. Wyatt, for he had come on from Covent Garden, whither he had taken Kitty to the opera.

"You are dreadfully late," Mrs. Wyatt remarked. "Gertrude's card will, I am afraid, be quite full."

"I have never been to a dance before," Dick replied, calmly, "and I don't suppose I shall ever come again. I shan't upset Miss Wyatt's card, for I propose simply to look on."

Mrs. Wyatt was considering which was the most unattractive of her nice girls to whom it would be safe to introduce him, when, to her relief, Dick declined all her offers and took up his stand at the entrance to the ballroom. In a minute he had identified the heroine of the evening and he watched her critically as she appeared and disappeared in the crowd of dancers. Not that she was the best dancer, or hers the prettiest face—there were two or three with a better claim to both distinctions—nor that there was anything supremely attractive in the magnificent physique of her womanhood when she was compared with half a dozen others. What arrested Dick amidst this charming galaxy of happy girlhood was the latent intellectuality in her face, the self-mastery revealed in the pose of her head, the disciplined reserve and self-knowledge, uncommon even in clever women, exceedingly rare in one who was still a girl. Force in a woman too often justly provokes the criticism that it is fatal to grace; in Gertrude Wyatt, however, it was combined with the subtle and concealed consciousness of sex that is the

secret of much feminine charm. And fate had so ordained that at this moment she should be dancing with the sunburnt man whose voice at the Marble Arch had startled Kitty a week ago.

"You are always surprising us," was her calm comment when Dick and she met, "but it's no use asking me for a dance. I'm more than full up."

"If I had wanted to dance I should have come earlier," he replied.

"Have you come, then, simply to wish me many happy returns of the day? That would be a compliment indeed."

"Honestly, I had forgotten it was your birthday, and" —he looked at his watch—"the birthday is passed, is it not?"

"I was meditating throwing over one of my partners, but I shan't now," she replied.

"No, please don't. I came simply to gratify my curiosity."

"And is it gratified?"

"Quite."

Gertrude betrayed no sign that Dick's imperturbable unconventionality was depriving her of the right she invariably claimed to direct the conversation.

"My last partner," she said, "curiously enough paid me precisely the same compliment. Mamma and I have never been so honoured before: an aluminium—no, a copper—king, and a great traveller. Let me introduce him to you. He is extraordinarily fascinating."

"No, thank you. Travellers only bore me. When I want fiction I prefer it as produced by your short-haired friends and controlled by the circulating libraries."

"You either know too much or too little," she replied. "In any case, I am sure you are wasting your time here." The band had begun again. "And here is my next partner, the best waltzer in London. Good-night, Mr. Forster."

She had taken the eager young man's arm. "Good-night," she repeated carelessly over her shoulder, and Dick bowed quietly.

"What! going already?" Mrs. Wyatt cried in dismay. "There is nothing else on this evening. We took care of that. You positively must stay a little longer."

But Dick was inexorable. "Miss Wyatt says I am wasting my time," he said pleasantly, "and I believe she is right—as indeed she always is." But in the street he lit a cigar, smoked it for two or three minutes and then threw it away. Inability to smoke always meant with Dick that he was failing to think at all.

"It is not good," Gertrude remarked to her mother's reproaches as they drove back at dawn, "even for a copper king to be treated as indispensable, and besides, it is ridiculous for him to come to dances. He is not a girl in search for a husband, nor a boy fit only to amuse young women. Mr. Forster is a man with a future, and if he does not know it, it is time one of our sex, mamma, taught him that women like a man to take himself seriously."

"You are as incomprehensible as your remarks," her mother retorted sleepily.

CHAPTER IV

THE PAST RECURS

As the hands of the clock in the hall pointed towards noon, Kitty came down the central staircase of the great hotel with a light step, and the smile in her eyes was ready to break out on her lips. This was a woman who seemed to expect pleasant news. The three or four men lazily smoking cigarettes in the cane chairs surveyed her with undisguised approval. Dress and hat were unmistakably French, but what was a much more commendable fact in an Englishwoman, they were worn with the effortless ease and distinction of the *femme vraiment française.* As she turned towards the bureau the porter, with his gold-trimmed hat in his hand, met her.

"There are no letters for Madame," he said, "but Monsieur—the Monsieur who arrived an hour ago—has commanded *déjeûner* on the terrace and begged me to say he would await Madame there."

Kitty checked the exclamation of surprise and pleasure that had escaped her, and hurried towards the terrace, the porter following her disappearing figure with profound admiration. He was accustomed to women of every kind, dressed as the wealth of the cosmopolitan South in February so variously and gorgeously dictates, but where in Monte Carlo was there a woman with such a marvellous complexion, such wonderful red-gold hair, and both absolutely her own? A waiter flung open one of the glass doors of the restaurant and Kitty paused to survey the terrace and discover the "Monsieur who had commanded *déjeûner.*"

Lunch was already in full swing in the brilliant sunlight and at the tables dotted about every language of

civilised Europe could be heard. Kitty's eye suddenly fell on Richard Forster, sitting with his back to the sapphire brilliance of the Mediterranean and the hills studded with flowers as a chasuble studded with jewels. The sudden flash in her eye revealed that if this was the porter's "Monsieur" it was not by any means the man whom she expected. And she waited a minute or two to conquer her disappointment before she advanced. Dick, as she might have predicted, was paying no attention to the company or the view; a bundle of papers on the table, a long document which he was annotating in pencil, absorbed him completely. And Kitty was impressed with the powerful contrast which the self-command and will in jaw and forehead presented to the luxurious worldlings, the frivolous pleasure-seekers, the hardened gamblers of both sexes about him.

"What a pig you are, Dick," she replied to his quiet greeting, "not to tell me you were coming after all. You've actually been here an hour, and all this morning I've been sitting in a dressing-gown on my balcony reading a horrid French novel when I might have been down here talking to you."

He surveyed her critically and swiftly, noted the single touch of colour in her hat, and approved the absence of jewellery, the simple lines of her frock. "No," he answered, folding up the papers, "I didn't tell you, because I have been having a bath, shaving, and sending five telegrams."

"Well, you might at least have let me know I was to expect you to-day."

"I didn't know myself till yesterday."

"You sent five telegrams to-day—couldn't you have sent me one yesterday from London."

"If I had said I was coming I should certainly have been prevented—so I didn't."

"You came slap through?" He nodded. "Are you very tired?"

"Tired?" he laughed. "Why should I be tired? I slept about eleven hours on end in the car, five more, that is, than I do in my bed. There was no one to get at me for twenty-nine hours—that's rest. Good Lord! I don't indulge in nerves, and if I was tired after sleeping for eleven hours in a train *de luxe*, I should only be suited to sweep a crossing or pretend I was a gentleman. And you?"—the critical eyes ran over her again—"well, you're looking as I like you to look."

"Thank you. Oh, I'm as well as any woman of my age has a right to be." She, in turn, was restudying him. Yes, Dick was more impressive than ever. She felt quite proud that the gay world here should see that this man belonged, as it were, to her.

"Will I pass muster amongst all your golden loungers?" he asked quietly.

"They're not fit to lace up your boots," she answered impulsively, and turned to enter into rapid conversation in French with the waiter.

"Not bad," Forster commented. "You're getting on, Kitty. That's right."

"When you've had for six months a French maid who can't speak English, it comes," she said, much pleased. "And do you forget that half a century ago or more I once went to quite a good school? Yes," she added, "it's quite a half century ago that I was a girl at school, and——"

"A buried half-century."

"Yes, buried at last, I do believe." He looked at her but said nothing. "Are you going to play, now you're here, Dick?" she went on gaily. "Of course you are; gambling is your job."

"Not exactly; but when I do gamble I like to have the odds on my side, not against me. The only gambling that's worth a man's while I left behind in the fog and slush of Throgmorton Street."

"Then why come to Monte Carlo?"

"I'm waiting for two or three eggs to hatch. I'm here

to mark time, to get warm, to dream, and incidentally to see you. Daughter of Eve, how much have you lost or won?"

"Not a red cent." Dick shrugged his shoulders. "My dear boy, I couldn't gamble with anybody's money but my own. And if I once began I should soon be pawning my last petticoat to find the chips. I've not staked a red cent, and I don't mean to."

"Then what have you been doing," he asked, "since I saw you last, four months ago?"

"I—let me see. Frocks in Paris one month. That was just lovely. Since then I've sat in the sun, talked to a great many men, perhaps to two women, eaten, drunk, slept, and," she added, "thought a good deal."

"Yes," he said slowly, pushing back his plate, "I begin to see you've been thinking a good deal. Thinking, strangely enough, suits you, Kitty. Go on thinking and you'll be a woman I shall be infernally proud of." He rolled up his napkin and selected a cigarette.

"Oh, you make me despair," she cried. "You've eaten the lunch of an anchorite, the pickings of an overfed sparrow. A year ago you told me you were going to begin to live, and your idea of living seems to be to sleep six hours, to work about fourteen, to live on a chop and a glass of water, and to walk between a stuffy office in Bartholomew Lane and two rooms in Bloomsbury furnished like a prison cell. And all the time you heap money on a woman you see for an hour every three months. That selfish creature spends it as if it were really hers, on frocks and frills, motor-cars, champagne and *entrées*, and suns herself like a sleek prize cat. It's not fair, Dick, it's not playing fair."

"Why not?" he asked. "Every woman should have a good time once in her life, should be able to add to the adornment of the world, that cannot have too many happy, pretty women. If things had been different, you would have had it years ago; therefore it's right you should have it now. Don't fret, I'm living right enough. If I prefer

a chop to a dinner of seven kickshaws by an overpaid chef, and if I can sleep sounder on a camp-bed than on a silk-hung four-poster with ball-bearings, why shouldn't I? Let me explain, my dear woman. What the self-made man has to fear is that he will go soft. He is probably vulgar, and can't really cure himself of that by any system of starving or overfeeding, though his sons may. But he can avoid the vice and danger of coddling himself with extravagance or luxury, doubly vulgar in him, until his morals and his will are as flabby as his muscles. Luxury is not my right, it's my peril. And unless I'm going back to the gutter out of which I worked myself, or merely become one more of the useless purse-proud nonentities who litter the tracks of commerce or buy a ridiculous place in a society that justly despises them, I've got to work, to keep every fibre of brain clean, taut and healthy. There is a sentence in Burke that puts it in a nutshell: 'If we command our wealth, we shall be rich and free. If our wealth commands us, we are poor indeed.' I am rich and a *parvenu*, but if fourteen hours' work a day won't give me command of my wealth, I am ready to make it eighteen and knock off the chop too. No man worth sixpence can live unless he recognises that the first man who requires severe discipline, if he is to secure self-command, is himself."

Kitty leaned back in her chair and stared in speechless wonder. Dick seldom spoke so openly or at such length, and to the woman to whom life is mainly a series of emotions, to whom the vague impulses of the will express themselves in the still vaguer language of passion, desire or sentiment, the conception of life as ambition sternly dominated by a passionless intellect is impressive chiefly because it is unintelligible.

"Don't worry about me," Dick was remarking, smiling. "I know what I want and where I'm going. The only question therefore is, do you?"

"What more do I want—could I want?" she replied.

"I've all the health and all the money that women pray for."

"Granted. But those who are really living don't think. Look at that Circe over there. Now you, my dear, confess to thinking a good deal—proof you want something."

"What is it I want then? Do tell me." She looked into his face with the most inviting movement of her dainty head.

Dick knocked off the ashes of his cigarette. His gaze scanned the terrace, with its gay, chattering groups, before it returned to his companion. "You want," he pronounced deliberately, "what women call a man's love."

The swift rush of colour died away in her cheeks. There was nothing of sex in that uncontrollable leap of the blood. It was rather the signal of dismay at the divination of a hidden, delightful thought, of a feeling not yet openly recognised or acknowledged, but secretly fostered because it was so precious. Her lip was trembling, her wistful eyes sought the sparkle in the sapphire sea, and mechanically one of her hands pushed back a stray wisp of hair burnished by the sun of the South.

"You're a queer man, Dick," she said presently. "I wonder if you are right."

"Oh, yes, I'm quite right. Women are women, even those falsified, fashion-plate travesties of women who swarm here. The want's there——" he pointed at her heart. "I can't make it good, and I couldn't if I wanted to."

"Are you quite sure?" She suddenly leaned forward.

"Yes." He put his cool hand on hers. "I don't wait seven years, you know, when there's something I must have."

"You're always right, Dick," she murmured. "You don't mean to, and therefore you can't *now*. But"—the suppressed passion in her voice surprised and hurt him,—"seven or eight years ago—it—you—ah! the world then would have been very different for you, and how different for me God alone knows."

"My dear child," he said soothingly, "gratitude and admiration in a man or a woman can never create love. I can't supply your want, but"—he paused—"I hope that someone else can and will. However, let that man take care, for if he's a sweep I'll wring his neck."

Kitty reflected on this and the other thoughts, secretly guarded thoughts, in silence.

"You can't supply the want *now*," she said slowly. "Whether it's here at all, whether anyone else can supply it is another business altogether. Don't ask me to discuss it as if it were a frock or a hat, for I can't and won't."

He gathered up his papers; he had a disconcerting way of taking her at her word, and then he paused. "There is something else," he said; "all women need it, but some—and you're one of them—more than others: a child, a daughter, maybe, in whose youth and beauty you can live again all your pleasures, all your triumphs, all your life as a girl. When you are a mother, Kitty, there will be nothing more for you to desire."

She drew a quick, deep breath, almost with a sob. Dick was right, how wonderfully right he, as a man, perhaps, could not know. This hunger in her heart was not merely the hunger for love, but the ceaseless, indefinable, passionate craving to enjoy what complete womanhood could give. Love, a husband—ah! she knew something of these; but a child, a daughter, bone of her bone, blood of her blood, a real second self, granted to the woman who to win it must wrestle with death—what would she, the childless woman, not sacrifice to gain a boon so precious? Love may prove a delusive dream, a husband the mockery of fate; but the reward of motherhood God alone can take away. Kitty's soul for the moment went out in a great dumb yearning. Then she hurriedly brushed away the tears, and looked at her absorbed companion.

"And you," she demanded, "do you not want what men call a woman's love?"

He passed a rubber band round the long envelopes.

"No," and the tone was decision itself. "Some day I may need a partner. But a woman's love is not part of my future as I have planned it."

"Take care," she said lightly, to conceal her intense disappointment. "Some day some one woman will have her revenge on you for that cruel and unnecessary boast. And what if the one woman who can teach you what a woman's love may be should be beyond your power to win?"

"We'll see; and now I'm off to watch the fools gamble. Will you come?"

A tall man passed, carelessly surveying the pair as he went by. Kitty glanced at him with equal carelessness, and her hand suddenly trembled. Forster was taking his hat and stick from the waiter.

"I must write two notes first," she said breathlessly. "I will join you in half an hour.

Kitty waited till he had disappeared, then resolutely reseated herself at the table. The tall man was the sunburnt traveller who had startled her before in London, and was now busy giving orders to the waiter. Presently he looked in her direction, hesitated, finally took off his hat. Kitty nodded brightly, smiling slightly. The man looked all round the terrace, hesitated again, and then walked up to her table.

"How do you do?" he said coldly. "I hardly expected to see you here."

"Why not? It is a good place for the frivolous when they are flush with the dollars, isn't it? But I certainly did not expect to see you here."

"I am merely passing through. I stopped to suit the convenience of a friend."

"Incognito?" Kitty interposed.

"I do not understand. Why should I be ashamed of being seen here?"

"Not here, but in your present company. Oh, you are quite safe. No one knows me, and——" shrugging her

shoulders—"I am as respectable as most of the other people."

"Mrs. Hennessy——" he began.

"My name is not Hennessy," she interrupted sweetly. "It is Wilson."

"Then Tom is——" he began, almost menacingly.

"Tom?—oh, Tom—I'm sure I don't know, and——" she looked him straight in the face—"I don't care. But won't you thank me for making you quite sure?"

"That man who was lunching with you," he said after a pause. "I know his face quite well. He knew Tom once, unless I am mistaken, and——"

"Certainly. You have probably seen my friend both in London and New York. Shall I introduce you to him?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, his name is Forster," she added, "and mine, you will remember, is Wilson. And now you have talked to me quite long enough, unless you want people to talk about you, and I know you don't like that. I won't say *au revoir*, but good-bye!" She held out a hand, but he merely bowed stiffly and there with a smile she left him.

When she found Forster, he was watching one of the tables with great interest.

"See that fellow there?" he said. "That's a real gambler."

"But there are dozens of them," she corrected, "dozens!—no, hundreds."

"On the contrary, they are really very rare. I know the breed, and he's one of it—the real thing."

"Why, he looks like the respectable father of a British family. Ten to one, Dick, there's a stout lady somewhere about, horribly shocked and horribly enjoying herself."

"I daresay."

Kitty studied the man in question, obviously English, of middle age, a little stout, well-dressed—one who revealed to his countrymen the air of the owner of a comfortable country house and all the characteristics, external

and internal, of a creditable representative of the cultivated landed gentry of Great Britain.

"Ah, he's cleaned out," Dick pronounced with interest, "and he doesn't wish Madam to discover his condition. Yes"—he surveyed him carefully as the player left the room—"yes, that's a real gambler." He turned to Kitty. "And now, tell me, what's the matter with you."

"Nothing." Kitty was startled, for Dick apparently till this minute had taken no notice of her.

"Come, come, don't deny it. Since we parted you've lived ten minutes at high pressure. But don't tell me unless you like—only if you do, let it be the truth, my dear woman."

"You're a perfect terror," she cried, "but it's quite true. Since you left me I have had ten minutes at bursting pressure, sitting on the safety-valve, in fact. My God! I nearly struck him."

"So?" He looked at her. "Beast!"

"Someone out of the past," she said in a low voice. "The very pink of propriety, the Ten Commandments in a Bond-Street-made suit. And he always treats me as if I were a Bowery tough." Dick was rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "No, I won't tell you his name; you wouldn't be any wiser if you knew it. However, I am pretty sure he won't pass into my tracks again, or yours. But," she added to herself, "if he does, there will be trouble. And now let us go and sit in the gardens."

"By all means. You've heard me speak of Gertrude Wyatt. If I stay here I shall be obliged to talk to her instead. We can slip out before she has discovered me."

But there he was quite wrong. Gertrude had not merely noticed his presence and his departure, but the more interesting fact that his companion was the woman who had dined with him alone at an hotel in Oxford.

CHAPTER V

A DECISION AND A DIFFICULTY

"My dear child, where have you been?" Mrs. Wyatt, lying on her bed in her dressing-gown, surveyed her daughter with sleepy curiosity. "I have been quite agitated about you."

"You have a hole in your stocking, mamma—two holes in fact," Gertrude replied. "Sale stockings are never economy, particularly when they profess to be silk. Been? —let me see." She sat down and took off her hat. "Well, I met Mr. Forster, and he was kind enough to give me an early tea." Mrs. Wyatt sat up promptly and rubbed her eyes. "You remember, mamma, that you were puzzled by the face of that woman who dined with Mr. Forster at Oxford. She is here in Monte Carlo, staying, apparently, at Mr. Forster's hotel. As I walked home I suddenly remembered who she is. She is the daughter of that man who kept a fashionable restaurant in New York, and she used to go to school quite near to where I did. Isn't it curious?"

"Did Mr. Forster tell you that?" Mrs. Wyatt demanded.

"Mr. Forster? Do give me a little credit, mamma, for common sense, if not for good manners and good taste."

"I recollect perfectly," Mrs. Wyatt remarked with irrelevant vigour. "She was mixed up in a dreadful scandal."

"Ah, that would have been, I suppose, when you had safely removed me to Girton. I am not interested in scandals. They are mostly stupid, and generally true."

Mrs. Wyatt rose and confronted her daughter. "Gertrude," she said severely, "I cannot think how a girl who has been educated at Girton, and who apparently knows

as much about the world as you do, could permit herself to take tea in public alone with a man like Mr. Forster, in Monte Carlo of all places. You sometimes make me think you are positively wicked. You must promise that you will never do it again."

Gertrude surveyed the trimming of her hat at arm's length. "I will do what you wish, of course," she said calmly, "but it is a pity, for Mr. Forster is always at his best in a *tête-à-tête.*" She rose as if to leave. "Sir Guy won't dine with us after all," she remarked, with her slow smile.

"Did you meet him too?"

"I'm afraid I did. He also offered me tea in a public place. That, too, I can promise, won't occur again for some time."

"And why is he not coming to dinner?"

"Because"—she paused—"because I have refused to marry him."

"Gertrude!" Mrs. Wyatt cried with genuine pain, "you have refused to marry Sir Guy Lemare?" The girl nodded and her mother threw up her hands almost with a wail of entreaty. "Sir Guy is very much in love with you; he is, and always has been, a model of conduct; he has ten thousand a year and will almost certainly succeed to the peerage of that disreputable cousin of his. You know perfectly well that we cannot go on living for ever at our present rate of expenditure, and yet you refuse an offer that should make any girl proud. You are mad, deplorably mad." But Gertrude still said nothing. "May I ask what were your reasons for this amazing act?"

"Sir Guy is a great traveller. Either I should have to travel too, which would be detestable, or he would have to stay at home, in which case he would bore me to death."

"And you had no other reason?"

"My other reason did not concern him." Gertrude walked over to her mother. "Come, mamma," she said,

"remember that even your daughter, after all, may have inherited a woman's irrational preferences. My other reason is that if Mr. Forster asks me to marry him, I intend to accept."

Mrs. Wyatt sat down on the bed and stared, first at this extraordinary daughter and then at the holes in her stocking. "You love him?—you love Mr. Forster?" she asked faintly.

Gertrude drew the pins thoughtfully out of her hat and reinserted them one by one. "No," she said, "and I don't think I can make him love me; but he can make me as successful and happy as I can make him."

"And when, pray, is he going to propose to you?" Mrs. Wyatt demanded.

The girl smiled. "That will depend, I fear," she said, "on the number of times I am permitted to take tea with him alone."

Her mother restrained herself. "Gertrude," she said earnestly, "I know it is useless for me to offer you advice in a matter where a mother's opinion should be decisive. But I do beg you to remember that the happiness of marriage for the woman does not merely turn on the husband being a man with a future. For the wife—even a wife as ambitious as you are—the past is"—she hesitated—"an element that—that——"

"My dear mamma, I do assure you," Gertrude interrupted, "I value my own future and the rights of women far too highly ever to forget what you point out. Like most sensible girls, I think about all these disagreeable things a good deal more than you imagine; and if I marry Mr. Forster I shall do it with my eyes open. At the same time it is only fair to Mr. Forster to say that he is not likely to conceal anything I ought to know or that will seriously affect his or my future. I remember, too, that I have often heard you say yourself, though I find it difficult to agree, that men and women must be judged by different canons of conduct, just because a woman's

nature and the part assigned to her by her sex are essentially different from those of a man, and always will be." She paused, kissed her mother, and the discussion was quietly ended by her leaving the room.

And while Mrs. Wyatt, with tears, ruefully rebelled against the fate that gave her a daughter so uselessly endowed with beauty, brains and health, and so mysteriously unfeminine in the cold-blooded motives of her actions, Richard Forster was found by Kitty placidly reading a book in the garden of the hotel. Reflection and study of Dick's face since he had arrived had convinced her that the phase of uncertainty which had been so marked in London in July had completely evaporated. But unless she was strangely misled by her knowledge of his character and career, he had cleared up all his doubts and difficulties, and the plans for his future were once more precise and definite and would shortly be translated into his usual decisive and unhalting action. Kitty, too, was at the parting of the ways, and she had sought her one loyal friend to let him partly into a secret—and so pleasant a secret!

"Dick," she began, sitting down beside him, "do you think marriage would make a great difference to you and me?—to our friendship?"

He put down his book. "Curious," he remarked. "That is just the question I was going to ask you."

Kitty's intention vanished in the thrill caused by this remark. "You are going to get married?" she demanded, turning eagerly to study his face.

"Perhaps, perhaps not—at any rate, not just at once."

"It is Gertrude Wyatt?" she asked.

Dick selected a cigar. "What do you think of her?" he replied quite coolly.

"She is handsome, a really beautiful figure, very clever and—a perfect beast." Dick smiled. "She hasn't as much heart as would fill the head of a black beetle. Oh,

for Heaven's sake, Dick, choose anybody—a girl from behind the counter, out of the gutter, a ballet-dancer—anything that has a real right to wear petticoats, rather than that selfish, stony creature. You don't love her—you can't—and she doesn't love you."

"What has love to do with it?" he asked. "One of the best qualities in Gertrude Wyatt is that she is clear-headed enough to recognise that passion is a very sandy foundation to build the house of marriage on."

"'Passion!" cried Kitty. "She has as much passion as most women, rather more I'll wager, but passion isn't love."

"I suppose not. But I am not an ordinary man and I don't want an ordinary wife. Some day, Kitty, I'm going in for politics—the big game on the big scale. But I shall want help if I am to succeed. There are very few women in England born in Gertrude Wyatt's class who have her beauty and combine it with her brains and her ambitions—women who have been really trained, not merely turned loose in the drawing-room with a pretty face and parlour tricks as frills to the sloppy, smattering acquaintance with half a dozen subjects that is the result of seven years in a fashionable girls' school. She doesn't spend her time on third-rate novels, flirting and hockey as a preparation for being a mother and a wife. You may smile, but Gertrude Wyatt has put more ideas into my head and more suggestions for carrying them out than all the men I ever met, and she's only on the threshold. She'll grow. I believe I could make as good an article of her as she would of me."

Kitty's foot beat impatiently on the terrace. Her whole nature revolted against these words on the lips of the man whom she admired, trusted and loved.

"I can't argue with you," she answered sadly. "But as sure as I sit here, if you—you who can love—marry without love, love will come, and not for Gertrude Wyatt, and that"—she leaned back with a bitter little laugh—

"that will be the very devil for you both, but particularly for you."

Forster put a hand on her shoulder. "You're a dear," he said simply. "But that is not my difficulty at present."

She looked inquiringly at him. He rose and walked to the edge of the terrace, where he stared out at the Mediterranean. Kitty waited, and then she joined him and slipped her arm in silent sympathy into his.

"When I marry," he said, in the deep tone of profound conviction, "I want my wife to believe in God."

Kitty was so startled that she withdrew her arm in order to look at him better. "The Wyatt girl," she said, "is a Christian. She goes to church as regularly as most young women do nowadays."

"Ah," with the faintest shrug of the shoulder, "yes, of course, all girls of her class do that, just as they wear low-cut dresses for dinner. But I am talking not about going to church but about real belief, real faith."

She drew a deep breath. "Then I don't know what you mean," she muttered.

"This: anyone can believe in the God of the churches if you are caught young enough and have it whipped into you. But I mean by faith a belief that there is a spiritual world, a spiritual element in every human being, that there is a moral and divine government of the universe, and that there are penalties for breaking the human laws of morality independent of and additional to the human ones, just because those laws are divine—a belief, a faith that rules every act of your life, every breath you breathe, and gives you the right to pray. Mind you, I don't believe it myself, but I should like my wife to have that sort of faith, because it was part of her nature, because she couldn't be what she is without its support."

"In that case," Kitty rejoined drily, "you had better sidetrack Gertrude Wyatt as soon as possible. She isn't that sort."

"That has yet to be discovered"—he turned away from

the sea—" and that sort requires a partner of the same sort," he added, as if the conclusion was disagreeable.

Kitty picked up his book from the seat. "*The Book of the Spiritual Life*," she cried, astonished. "I had no idea, Dick, you knew such books existed."

"How many women," he retorted, with a smile, "ever have any idea in what a man they think they know is really interested."

They walked in silence towards the hotel.

"Kitty," he said suddenly, "do you believe?"

She straightened her hat. "If I do," she answered in the hard cynical voice most painful of all things in a young and pretty woman, "if I do, it is not from my experience so far of the working of the moral and divine government of the universe. My life has not taught me yet I have a right to pray."

Neither said a word until they were leaving the lift at the first floor.

"You shall lend me that book," Kitty said suddenly.

He surrendered it readily. "You might do worse," he answered, "if you made Gabrielle read it to you. It would be better for her at any rate than Bourget, Anatole France, and Pierre Louys."

Kitty opened the volume in her bedroom, surrounded by all the costly and dainty apparatus for the toilette of a luxurious woman of fashion, and her eye fell on this passage marked with the pencil of a self-made financier—

The Temple of the life spiritual is closed to all such as seek its gates only in moments of distress and danger. It demands from its votaries habitual constancy of service. In no other wise shall they come at that illumination in which they may apprehend regions of the world invisible. Yet, by these regions and their mysterious influences we are girt about, as is the land by the unfathomable sea, and the very roots of our being strike deep into the sources of their vital fires . . . . The call to love,

rightly understood, is in truth a call to self-renunciation, as indeed is every call to lead the higher life. The soul to whom such a call comes is directly confronted with the necessities of sacrifice, for devotion to another in its highest form leads to the Way of the Cross. Only through much suffering many the Saint attain the fulfilment of the promise of the Spiritual Life . . . .

Kitty shut the book, passionately flung her window open, and stepped on to the balcony. The lights of Monte Carlo, the fragrance of the flowers and the sun-soaked South were wafted up from over the blue-grey sea and mingled in their call with the waltz from the band in the restaurant, filling up with its gay throngs. Pleasure and life and love lay all around her; the blood of youth and of health throbbed responsive to the whisper of Spring, the challenge of the world to a woman to claim and enjoy what that world was so ready to admit was a woman's duty and right. "Thou shalt go without! Thou shalt go without!"—that was always the mocking, defiant, cruel answer, the warning message of the unseen world about her when she stretched out eager arms to snatch the passing pleasure, when her heart cried out for love to heal the wounds of the past, to complete for what womanhood prayed. Ah! yes; but that was only the lesson of the preacher, the saint, the ascetic, the men and women who trampled on the birthright of nature. Was it in any sense the true lesson of life? Was there no other lesson, no message of comfort for suffering women, battered and beaten because they were weak enough to sacrifice themselves to an impossible ideal in their struggle with the hateful forces that would rob them of all that could make a woman's life satisfying and joyous? Was there for women who hungered for love, for life in all its matchless strength and pleasure, no other command than this inhuman summons to self-renunciation? Surely, surely. But if there was not, if the moral government of the universe, the spiritual

world that girds the visible and material as the unfathomable sea girds the land, required this self-abasement, then she would rebel fiercely, pitilessly, because she must. Better for those who could really live as health and beauty and the womanhood within them ceaselessly urged, better to rebel and go down in the struggle than to accept on their knees a creed from which the heart revolted, a creed that made them the serfs of priests and dreamers.

CHAPTER VI

"THOU SHALT GO WITHOUT"

KITTY, very simply dressed, came down early for dinner. No, contrary to her expectation, there were no letters, and somewhat disappointed she moved slowly towards the restaurant. As she peeped in to see if by any chance Dick was already there, her eye suddenly fell on her sunburnt acquaintance, arranging with the head waiter for a table, and by a curious accident engaging one quite close to that reserved for herself. The unexpected sight of Sir Guy's athletic figure and prim, if bronzed, face, surveying the women particularly in the half-filled room with a chill disdain, and, as Kitty read it, a Pharisaical self-approval, fired her anew. Turning swiftly on her heel she sped to the lift and breathlessly whisked in upon her astonished maid. "Gabrielle!" she cried, "Gabrielle! get me out the new green silk, quick!" In a very few minutes she had slipped off the simple frock and was surveying herself before her long mirror, under the blaze of the electric light, while Gabrielle tugged, smoothed and patted, with something of her mistress's suppressed excitement. The famous house in the Rue de la Paix had surpassed itself, and Kitty noted with the defiant delight of a spoiled child the bravura effect that the subtle pale green made against the Titianesque glow of her hair, the feverish glitter in her Irish eyes, and the matchless delicacy of her skin.

"It will shock that beastly Puritan," she was thinking, as she wheeled at the mirror and marked that the *décolletage* of her bodice was cut far more daringly low than she really preferred in soberer moments. "But I mean to —I mean to," she whispered to her beating heart.

"Madam is superb," Gabrielle exclaimed with a dramatic gesture of admiration. "Yes, madam is superb tonight and monsieur will be pleased."

Kitty ripped her plain locket off and tossed it away. "My emerald lizard," she commanded, and the maid's French fingers arranged the gold and green gem into a saucy sprawl amidst the fairy tendrils of that wonderful hair. And when her diamond pendant and bracelets had been added, the maid fairly clapped her hands. Monsieur had arrived and was taking her to the play. Women—it is a platitude of the psychology of the novelist—can always penetrate by intuition the motive of another woman's acts. Unfortunately, the intuition which is the gift of a sex can perhaps perform miracles, but it cannot supply facts; and sometimes the facts that the male reason requires for a conclusion are more illuminating than the power to dispense with them.

When Kitty reappeared at the restaurant door the big room had filled up. It was a gala Opera night, and everyone of the flower-bedecked tables had its quota of gay diners. Under the shaded lustre of the countless lamps the white and gold decorations of the walls lit up a panorama of jewels, flushed faces, and a bewildering brilliance of toilettes, only made more bewildering and brilliant by the sombre black of the men. Kitty's entry was accidentally timed to be dramatically effective, and as she swept to her seat she knew that she had hushed the chattering tongues, that she had arrested the attention of every man, including the waiters, and perhaps, better still, that every woman was regretfully admitting there was not a better made dress in the room than this wonderful green silk, or one which suited the wearer so perfectly. The recognition of her success was intoxicating, and with a little encouragement, so buoyantly audacious was the consciousness of beauty, life, health, youth, Kitty could have danced up the floor to the caressing cadences of the waltz that the band was playing. Lemare, she had

observed in a flash, had looked up with the rest, and his critical gaze watched her pause, single out her table, and then sail past him, cheeks aflame and her head in air. Their eyes met for a fleeting second, but neither in her defiant challenge nor in his British impassiveness was there revealed any recognition that this bronzed traveller and this radiant beauty had once been acquaintances, that they shared in a common knowledge of a common past.

Dick too was a perfect foil. Of the diamonds and the copper that helped to bring him here there was no trace. Even the stud in his shirt-front was plain mother-of-pearl. Indeed, until the luxurious rustle of her skirts announced her arrival, he alone of all the cosmopolitans had remained unmoved, absorbed in his book, oblivious of the glare, the band, the turmoil of tongues, the sudden hush, still less of the unconcealed fascination his face and simplicity of dress exercised on the women dotted about him.

"Am I very late?" Kitty asked penitently.

He closed the *Goschen on Foreign Exchanges*, after inserting a marker, and looked up. "Twenty minutes," he said, "but," he surveyed her, and she eagerly tried to read his verdict, "it was worth waiting for. A woman who is punctual is either a frump or a blue-stocking. I prefer them as Nature turns them out, plus a little help from"—his eyes smiled at the green lizard—"*The Book of the Spiritual Life.*"

"I am not a blue-stocking," Kitty retorted, adding with mischievous distinctness for the benefit of the next table, where Lemare sat coldly correct—"the colour wouldn't suit to-night or at any time. Mine are silk and green."

"I suppose it's all pretty complete," he remarked. "A fraudulent balance-sheet cooked by a financier is nothing to the skill that lies in a dress like that."

"I thought you'd like to see where some of your money was going, Dick." This also was for the benefit of the

next table. "I never cooked a balance-sheet, but I have cooked rashers of bacon for undergraduates."

"Well, perhaps the black stuff and aprons suited you just as well," he said calmly.

"Dick!"

"You are too astonishing, Kitty. What will be the next move, I wonder?"

"Tears and a scrubby serge," she laughed—"the scrubby serge that always crumples into lumps and knots the first time you wear it. But it's easy to be astonishing when there's some figure and complexion left and you can give *carte-blanche* to the best dressmakers. The astonishing woman really is the one who can conquer the world with a frock she has made herself. Take away the jewels, Dick, and the dodges and I dwindle back into the gutter."

"As I do," he rejoined drily.

"It makes me hate myself," she pursued rapidly. "I often wish I had been dumped on the world with a plain face and a flat chest, but the sort of woman who, even if you saw her eating fried potatoes with her fingers at a street stall, you'd know was a lady."

He studied her flushed cheeks. "Why hate yourself? I don't hate myself. I wasn't born a gentleman, but I got something as good as birth—brains. They're going to make up for the other until I am carried out feet first. You got your endowment too from Mother Eve. You can, if you will, compel it to do more for you than the potato lady with a plain face and a flat chest."

"But I am vulgar," she said slowly. "I know I am, and it makes me mad at times."

He leaned back and reflected. "Yes," he remarked coolly. "You are vulgar—sometimes."

"Dick!" she protested, with tears in her voice, "must you always say what you think?"

"You are vulgar, as I am sometimes," he repeated, "but we're sloughing it off, you and I, and in another

year or two the little that remains will be what is expected from me, and will be no more than an interesting American piquancy in you."

"Tell me straight," she demanded suddenly, leaning across the table, "would you rather I took all this off and put on the dowdiest evening rag I possess?"

He studied her anew before he answered. "No," he replied. "The frock is yourself—one of your many selfs, my dear. You are the sea in a storm this evening, and the frock is the foam that's needed to make the illusion quite entrancing. We will just spend an evening together, you and I, while the spray is still flying. For you are a lovely woman, Kitty, and till to-night I didn't really know how lovely you really are."

The depression dissolved as swiftly as it had risen in a roseate consciousness of power, the woman's power, eternal, intoxicating.

"Don't be alarmed," he said, "I shall not make love to you. If I were St. Anthony it would be different, but I'm only a financier on the make."

And Kitty laughed. She did not want love from him to-night, but comfort and confidence. To a young woman the gift of a man's friendship, will, if she is wise, be a far more precious possession than the homage to her beauty, as easily won and given as it is easily renounced or lost, that homage on which both men and women are accustomed to bestow the conventional title of "love." And if the friendship be the devotion of a man exceptionally strong in brain and character, one who is master of his own fate because he is master of himself, it may well prove to be a more subtly appreciative acknowledgment of the qualities masked by her charm, because it is only visible to, and valued by, the judgment that can separate the woman from her beauty. Kitty's experience of the world had been long, varied and bitter enough. Since her teens she had been wooed by lovers of all kinds; there had never been a time when even against her will

she could not feel she wielded over most men a power neither she nor they could explain and had no wish to resist. But from the first, Dick had been different to every other man. She recognised how immeasurably inferior she was to him in every way; she had indeed always recognised it; but his progress and growth since he had "come back" amazed, and when she reflected on it, terrified her. And she only hoped now with a passionate desire that she might be permitted to keep him as the real friend —not the man who provided her so generously with everything that money could give, for he would never desert her in that sense—but the really loyal friend, who could find in the woman, despite every failing of her sex, some quality that he could regard as indispensable for his own life. It had been so until to-day, it must be so to-morrow and for ever, for no man's love could atone for its loss.

"Hallo!" Dick was remarking, "our gambling friend is not alone."

She started from her reverie. Their "gambling friend" was passing them to Lemare's table and he was accompanied by a young girl.

"That's rather a pretty child," Dick commented quietly.

Kitty studied the new-comers with a touch of jealousy. The elder man looked as he had looked in the Casino at lunch-time—the educated English country gentleman, well groomed, self-confident, stamped unmistakably with all the characteristics of his class and his race. The girl, to Kitty's mind, was insignificant, in her stiff schoolgirl's white frock, barely reaching her ankles, and her brown hair tied simply with a ribbon. But there was more than the promise of indefinable grace in the shy simplicity of her bearing, in the pride born of an unconscious fastidiousness and austerity within. The unruffled innocence of her young face in this crowded restaurant, where the artificial, the theatrical in human beings jostled and blended with the wicked and the vile, was almost tragic.

Lemare had risen and his hand rested affectionately on the girl's shoulder. For the moment his well-bred disdain seemed in perfect consonance with her artless simplicity. And as she sat down she was questioning him eagerly and he was replying with a complete absence of his customary starched self-sufficiency that revealed him to Kitty in a new light.

"Your gambler's daughter, I suppose," she said carelessly.

"I suppose so. I am sorry for her," Dick replied, after a fresh survey.

"Why?" Kitty asked, much surprised.

"It is not good for any girl to be the daughter of a real gambler. She had better hurry up and marry the tropical fellow. He looks as if he could protect her."

Kitty checked the swift retort that had almost escaped her. Dick and she finished their dinner in monosyllables, but a flattering comment reached her ears when she rose to go.

"What a handsome woman!" the gambler remarked genially to his companion as he glanced at the next table.

Lemare shrugged his shoulders. He, too, checked in time the reply that sprang to his lips, and Kitty moved away without his betraying that she was anything more to him than any other handsome, over-dressed and over-decorated woman among the many such in this restaurant.

"She has lovely hair," the girl had remarked with enthusiasm, yet it was not on Kitty's wonderful frock and figure that her glance lingered. It was on Dick. Something in his loosely-built frame, so sinewy and strong, the air of power and command, above all, in that face and finely-shaped head, had swiftly gripped a girl's critical attention. Unconsciously her innocent gaze followed him, all unconscious of the homage, until he disappeared. But with the reserve of girlhood she said nothing, though the memory of those penetrating hazel-coloured eyes, the chin moulded like Napoleon's, the waves in his hair just

touched at the temples with grey, haunted a maiden's memory for many a day.

"I will sing to you," Kitty said in her sitting-room. "I have revived my singing, Dick, and I am in the mood to sing to-night. My master in London thinks I am a fool not to take to the stage. You shall judge."

Dick smoked his cigar and agreed partially with the master. Kitty's contralto was like herself, rich and deep and vibrating with the emotional sensitiveness, the slumbering passion that, like the tears and the laughter, were always fighting for the mastery behind her superficial gaiety. And so she sang him first some of the Irish songs that she had learned from her mother—a true daughter of that gifted race which has taught the world the tragedy in comedy and the comedy in tragedy. True, she had never known the mellowed softness of Kerry hills and Kerry pasture, the loveliness and the luxuriance of a rain-soaked, sun-soaked land of moor and meadow, of purple mountains rich in green woods; but the dowry of the soil was in her blood and her voice quivered and flickered in its divinely irrepressible transitions of light and shade, of pathos, humour and poignant passion as the songs themselves. Dick sat on the sofa and listened with critical enjoyment; but when without warning she suddenly melted into a crooning laugh and had darted back into her Virginian girlhood and the plantation melodies, he let his cigar go out, closed his eyes and dreamed he, too, was away down in that South whose magic call is as inexplicable and as unforgettable to the men and women it has bred as is the call of the western soil and air to the sons and daughters of the Celt. He was quite angry when they were interrupted by a servant entering with a letter. Kitty glanced at it, recognised the hand with a swift flush over neck and breast, and then tossed it on the piano.

"Read it," Dick said laconically.

"It can wait," she answered, and, instead, she drew up

a footstool and sat down beside the sofa. "Dick," she said, "I wonder if any woman will ever make you really in love with her."

"I hope not," he remarked slowly, as she looked up at the gravity of his tone. "I hope not, for I should make an abject fool of myself." He rose. "You had better take your letter and yourself to bed, my dear. I am going to do some work."

She nodded quickly and slipped from the room without another word. The riotous mood of revelry had been replaced by the quiet as of a great happiness, and when she had sent Gabrielle away she stood by the fireplace, with the letter in her hand, looking far into the future revealed by the flames. Then she opened the envelope and began to read. The paper suddenly fluttered to the floor. She tottered to her chair at the dressing-table. "No—no!" came in a cruel cry—"it isn't true!" She buried her face and head in her bare arms and sobbed dry tears. Presently with an effort she seized the letter and read its few lines steadily to the end. They had neither beginning nor a signature.

"I cannot come to Monte Carlo as I had promised, for I have learned what you should have told me yourself. I do not reproach you, but you will understand why I do not come, why I shall never come again to see you."

That was all, but enough, more than enough to shatter a hope, a dream, the dawn of a new life. She tore the letter into fragments and stood up proud, as a princess might at the bar to receive sentence from a judge whose jurisdiction she denied, opened the shutters, and, with clenched fingers, gazed motionless out into the passionless beauty of the Italian night, all a woman's soul dashing itself in futile protest against the gaol-bars of the past, so unjust, so cruel, so remorseless and so real. Suddenly with a moan she flung herself again into the sitting-room.

"Dick," she wailed, "this place—I hate it, I hate it! Oh, take me away from it—take me away from it!"

He looked up from the table where he was working, rose and caught her as she stumbled sobbing to his side. His cool hands held hers with the most consoling sympathy that man has to offer, the sympathy of those who can be pitiful and merciless because they have no fear of the world.

"Very well," he said quietly, "we will leave to-morrow."

Not to-night, nor at any time did he ask to be told the cause of this piteous appeal. It was enough for him that his one and only friend was crushed by the forces that men can, but women cannot, fight and overcome.

The dawn had broken before he went to bed and found the dreamless sleep that never failed him, the dawn that compelled poor Kitty once more to face a present and a future that could never shake off the fetters of the past.

CHAPTER VII

A SCHOOLGIRL'S TEAR

It was going to be really hot, the dry intense heat with which Paris at the end of June reminds tourists that her season has already been transferred to the shores of Normandy. At nine o'clock Richard Forster stood in the Rue St. Honoré, watching the gutters being sluiced, and the thrifty women of the *bourgeoisie* busy at their marketing, for he was wondering in what way he was going to spin out the next twenty-four hours. Twirling his cane he sauntered idly along the shady side of the street, and almost without knowing it had begun to cross the Place du Carrousel. At the flank of the Louvre he paused, studied Gambetta on his pedestal, surveyed the gardens of the Tuileries and the long ascending vista fringed by the chestnuts, above which the Arc de Triomphe already stood up in a white haze of quivering sunlight. Irresolutely he crossed diagonally towards the entrance to the Picture Galleries.

"If you think, sir, you can get in," said a genial young voice, "you're jolly well mistaken." Dick started from his reverie and smiled at the flannel-suited young stranger in a Panama hat who had accosted him so frankly. "I could see you are English," the young man proceeded, "so I took the liberty of saving you the trouble we've just had. The gallery is closed."

"Thank you," Dick replied, "but I wasn't going to see the pictures."

"Oh, then, I beg your pardon; you see we've just been so horribly sold that I thought I'd spare another Englishman from the same chouse."

Dick raised his hat politely and they parted.

"Did you ever hear such rot?" the young stranger was grumbling to his companion. "Fancy closing their National Gallery on Mondays. Just like them, isn't it?"

Forster idly watched the pair walk away with British briskness. A pleasant young man that, and the girl with him looked so refreshingly English and cool. The blush at Dick's searching survey of her face was still lingering as she disappeared behind Gambetta. Extraordinarily fine brown eyes she had, and there was a subtle grace in her girlish figure. Dick meditatively sauntered on through the Louvre courts and out to the front of the Palais Royal and so up the Avenue de l'Opéra.

"All the way to Versailles," said another voice, "all the way to Versailles and back. Fine drive, fine museum."

He had reached Cook's office and a large char-à-banc with four horses was slowly being filled by its importunate conductor with English and American tourists.

"I wouldn't go to Versailles," Dick replied fiercely, "if you paid me a sovereign for every step those screws take there and back."

"Oh, come along, Dot," a familiar young voice was pleading coaxingly. "Don't be a ninny. Of course, auntie will be jolly sick, but we were told to do the museums, and this rotter here says Versailles is a museum. We'll send her a wire from Versailles, if they allow you to send wires on Monday and in English in this weird country. Come along."

For reply the girl gathered her holland skirt in one hand and laughingly swung herself up into a seat on the box. Then her fine brown eyes fell on Dick standing gazing absently at the Café de la Paix, and she looked hastily away. When he turned he wavered irresolutely as if he regretted his remark to the conductor and wished to respond to the gentle hints of Fate on this superb June morning.

The girl's companion had caught the direction of her glance.

"So it is, by Jove!" Dick heard him say. "The fellow looks pretty well fed up with Paris too. Picturesque 'blighter' all the same, don't you think, Dot? Sort of Commercial Bismarck, I should say."

The char-à-banc rumbled off. The opportunity of going to Versailles with that company had been removed by the same Fate that had offered it.

"That's very curious," was his comment. "She has grown up quite as pretty as she had a right to expect."

She was, of course, the girl whom, two years before, he had seen in a restaurant at Monte Carlo. But he had taken longer to recognise her than she had him. The blush by the statue of Gambetta had been the homage from within to the message from a maiden's memory, and the accidental meeting that morning had only heightened the recollection of the past.

Dick continued his aimless saunter down the shady side of the Rue de la Paix. In one of the little public victorias standing by the pavement a woman suddenly leaned forward and smilingly greeted him.

"I am waiting for mamma," she replied to his question, "she is being tried on inside there. I am sure she would much value your opinion if you would give it. I stayed outside because I never offer advice that is not acted on, and mamma's French in this heat is exasperating. Is it business or pleasure that brings you to Paris?" she added, shifting her parasol to make a better frame to her head.

"Business." His eyes approved the shifted parasol.

"Then make it pleasure this evening. We are going to *Carmen*. Come to our box. It would be a real kindness."

"I can't be there before the second act."

"That will be still better. You won't interrupt the best music; but you will prevent the pseudo-Spanish dancing which is always ridiculous, not to say improper, from getting on to mamma's nerves. And now do go inside and see that my parent is not being persuaded that crimson

is her colour. She is bent on gore unless you intervene with a man's readiness to rush in where angels fear to tread."

But Dick merely raised his hat and passed on.

The young lady waited patiently the quarter of an hour before Mrs. Wyatt emerged, nor did she make any remark until the victoria was turning into the Rue Castiglione.

"You are going to have a headache this evening," was what she then said, with the assurance of a domestic prophet.

"My dear child, I have a headache already."

"I feared so, and I am sure it will last all the evening."

Mrs. Wyatt accepted the prediction with plaintive matter-of-factness. "But what will you do in that case," she asked, "about that wretched box at the Opera? *Carmen* of all pieces is impossible if my head is as bad as it is now."

"Don't worry, mamma. I can quite well go by myself."

"But, my dear child——"

"One can always quite well enjoy Opera by oneself," Gertrude replied. "That is the advantage of being a musical and modern young woman in a foreign country."

And the arrival of the cab at their hotel cut the conversation short. Accordingly, when the castanets were just beginning after the curtain had risen on the second act, Gertrude Wyatt heard the door behind her open.

"You are just in time, Mr. Forster," she remarked, "to tell me why the only one of the dancers who is at all pretty is the only one that has no jewels."

Miss Wyatt was quite right. The one really pretty dancer had no jewels. Her gipsy companions most inappropriately whisked their Spanish skirts in a rainbow of aggressive sparkles from the diamonds on their breasts.

"The reasons," Gertrude remarked as Dick said nothing, "why men give diamonds are as incomprehensible as the reasons why women accept them. When you give them, Mr. Forster, have you any reasons?"

"Certainly. But"—he drew up his chair to the front of the box—"I never explain them, least of all to the person to whom I give them. I prefer," he smiled, "to be misunderstood, which is the same as being incomprehensible, is it not?"

"If you were a woman," she answered, "I should agree."

They talked only at intervals of other things, and presently Dick became aware of a fresh, delicate and suggestive move of Fate. A box, some half-dozen places away, was occupied by an English family party—a matronly lady and what he now knew to be her nephew and niece, the young man and the girl who had gone to Versailles on the char-à-banc. Dick found his attention wandering from the stage. The gaily irresponsible chatter in that box witnessed to the unalloyed enjoyment with which youth was following the vagaries of *Carmen*. But it came mainly from a man's voice. The elderly lady was comfortably dozing, while the girl, in her simple white frock, sat with her head resting on her hand gazing in rapt absorption, heedless of her brother's ceaseless comments. Not quite, had Dick known it, for every now and then she stole a look at her neighbours and studied first Dick himself and then the handsome, intellectual face of the woman whose profile and finely-developed figure were silhouetted against the darkened auditorium.

When the interval came Gertrude sat back a little. "I am glad to hear of your last move," she said quietly. "I am sure you are doing the right thing, not merely because politics can give you a career, but because our politics badly need you."

"There's career right enough," he answered. "But I am not very hopeful." Gertrude with a look invited him to explain. "You remember what Disraeli said: that success in English public life depended on one of three things —birth, genius, or a million of money."

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"You have one, if not two, of the three," she interposed.

"No; only one, and the least important—the million. I am not a genius, and the England of to-day is certainly not the England of Disraeli's remark, which was perhaps never true."

"Money will carry a man farther to-day than it would thirty years ago."

"That is precisely the reason. The sovereigns are like bayonets. You can do everything with them except sit upon them. And when I get to the top I must have something solid to sit on, otherwise it's not worth while getting there."

Gertrude opened her fan. Her slow, deep breathing showed how carefully she was thinking. "You know what my views are about that," she said presently. "There was never such an opportunity as to-day for a politician with a real creed of his own—a politician whose birth or whose money, it is irrelevant which, can make him absolutely independent of the fear or favour of every man and woman from the throne to the gutter." She shut the fan and her voice dropped. "England, the heart of an empire, is slowly dying of fatty degeneration. If it believes in any gospel, it is the Gospel of Ease, disguised by the doctors under the name of 'Recreation.' Our women are more responsible for it even than the men: all classes of them, from the woman in Belgrave Square who coddles herself into neurasthenia, aggravated by cosmetics, to the factory girl whose happiness consists in a string of sham pearls and an imitation silk underskirt. These are the women who are the sisters of the young men of to-day and the mothers of the young men of to-morrow. What the empire cries out for is a national leader, who will hammer the Gospel of Ease out of us, and bring back the Gospel of Work which once made us great. Discipline—discipline is what we girls most of all want. You can teach it us if you like, Mr. Forster."

"I doubt it. That is the preacher's, not the politician's, task. I am not a preacher, and the England of to-day will only worship success. It invites Jeremiah to dinner, but it hasn't the imagination to recognise an Isaiah, even if one existed, which is not the case."

Gertrude's eyes were glowing. "Nevertheless, you must agree with my diagnosis," she said, "for it is your own."

"Exactly. The country is slowly perishing of the moral cancer that is a sure symptom of the sleeping sickness of States. But the Gospel of Ease is only a symptom, not a cause of the disease. You can cut the cancer out in this limb and then in that, but in the end it will beat you, by attacking a vital organ. It's a new cell in the race that's wanted, not a new creed.

Gertrude straightened herself. "New creeds," she said, "if they are the right creeds always end by creating new cells."

"You have often told me," he began, when he had reflected on this, "that I can be successful in politics. Do you honestly believe I can be something more? that I can really help to create the new cells that the organism of Empire wants?"

Gertrude permitted her eyes to study him. Most men would have read the unmistakable answer there, and the discovery would have laid them prostrate at her feet. Genuine admiration is the most difficult thing for a man to win from a handsome young woman with the brain of a leader of men.

"Certainly I do," she replied composedly.

"The creed," he added, "implies not force, nor talent, nor power to work but"—his hand clenched on his knee—"spiritual and moral convictions, principles of conduct, ideals and a faith that I have not got and that no education, and I have had a good try, will create."

"Then you must find a partner." She was smiling.

"Ah!" His eyes rested for a moment on the neigh-

bouring box, and on the brown hair and eyes of the girl absorbed in the play. "A woman, of course?" he questioned as lightly as he could.

Gertrude met the glance deliberately. "Not necessarily a woman by any means," she replied. "But if it is to be a woman, be sure, Mr. Forster, that it is the rightful heir, for there can only be one. The others are only pretenders to the pulpit."

Dick for some minutes studied the nape of her neck and her fine shoulders as if they would solve the difficulty. The girl was right, he was thinking slowly, and she had indicated the vital difference in politics between success and statesmanship, between a career and realised ambitions. She was right, too, in the emphasis that she laid on the necessity of a creed—a faith—ideals. The cruelty, the maddening cruelty of his position lay in the damning fact that Nature and Fate had combined to give him apparently everything an ambitious man could desire—health, strength, brains, wealth, power; but they had also cursed him with an ideal which the future, as he could make it, would not satisfy. He, most of all men, needed just that new creed which was the end and the means of spiritual regeneration, and a creed came not from the head, but the heart. "I have no heart," he said to himself in a bitter despair. Could this woman, who could inspire passion in so many men and for such obvious reasons, really give him the one thing needful? Why, then, did she inspire in him every feeling except the true passion of the heart?

He would be proud, happy, fortunate, to make her his wife, but—he passed his hand through his hair—but was it not, after all, only the husk of life that she offered? and was not the reason that she, too, had no heart, no real faith and creed that could regenerate a new birth, could quicken into triumphant power the forces that were helpless without it. Gertrude alternately encouraged, challenged, defied, and denied him. She was the riddle

of the Sphinx, permanent because it is the riddle of sex. And Gertrude was thinking too as she saw the procession of the Toreador wind on to the stage and heard the trumpets of the Toreador's song cry with a clarion call to the blood. For Gertrude, like so many only daughters, had been obliged both to create and to solve her own problems. Endowed by Nature with a body and a brain, either of which alone sufficed to make a girl remarkable, she had been educated by a commonplace mother at a fashionable school where she had learned that the duty of womanhood was summed up in achieving a conventional liberty through the medium of marriage; she had been taught that the surest way of securing the docile husband necessary for a woman's liberty lay in the neatness of a waistband, the cut of a skirt and the exploitation of a properly cultivated figure. She had acquired the school-lesson and then appalled her mother by insisting on four years at Cambridge, from which she had emerged, not, as her mother tearfully expected, an intellectual slattern, but a young woman with a carefully concealed knowledge of the world and of herself, astonishing because it rested on a girl's calmly reasoned recognition of the limitations imposed by her own powers and, above all, by her sex. Life in London had followed as a matter of course. Intensely ambitious, she enjoyed in the society of Mayfair the process of breaking hearts as a surgeon may enjoy operations both for their scientific interest and for the increased mastery of his resources that perpetual practice alone can give. Girton and London had only strengthened her determination to marry, but she was in no hurry. Life was excellently pleasant and marriage implied a repellent self-surrender only to be justified by a gain otherwise unobtainable. Marriage implied a husband and children, both disagreeably disturbing to the pleasures of girlhood and the ordered progress of the intellectual life. Marriage was, however, in the inscrutable nature of things, a necessity to complete womanhood, yet tolerable only if the husband

partially compensated for the sacrifice. Even thoughtful men perhaps seldom realise how little a clever or a devoted husband can offer by way of compensation to the beautiful, self-centred, able and selfish woman in return for what marriage inevitably demands from her. Gertrude certainly had no girlish illusions on this point. Dick from the first had arrested her attention. The physical, almost more than the mental in him, had appealed to the physical in her. Here was the man who could achieve pre-eminence: not one who had achieved it, for she desired to enjoy and share in the process. The compensation that Dick was to pay her for the surrender of herself was to be a devotion in the man to the woman which the woman would enjoy but need not return. He was to be her husband and lover, she was to be in reality only an ally. More than once she had as to-night in cold blood prevented him from bringing matters to a definite issue because she desired, as an essential preliminary, to inspire in him the real passion of love, not merely the willingness to ask for a contract, mutually advantageous and essential for the realisation of their respective ambitions. And now to-night, for the first time, she had been halted by a flash of fear. What if the very womanhood on which she had throughout so confidently relied was about to play her false? what if this man became not a pliant and devoted instrument of the ambition she had created and could perfect, but a prize to be won at any price: an element indispensable to her life as a woman? What if the passion she despised her weaker sisters for accepting as the privilege and duty of their sex, mastered herself: passion for a man's love because she, the woman, loved first? What, indeed?

The curtain had fallen on the dead Carmen. Dick, coming forward in silence with her cloak, noted one thing alone. Behind the back of her brother and her aunt, the girl he had recognised in the neighbouring box was furtively wiping away a tear: only a girl's tear, shed for the fate of a worthless coquette, but behind a girl's tear may

lie a secret that every man will be fortunate to discover in time how to interpret aright.

Dick escorted Gertrude Wyatt to her hotel practically in silence.

"Will you come and see me to-morrow?" she said, as she bid him good-night; "I have given you my advice to-night. I want you to give me yours to-morrow."

He assented readily enough, but as he walked back in the balmy fragrance of the summer night he was reflecting rather comically on what a fool he had been not to go to Versailles. Was it that schoolgirl's tear that had convinced him of his folly?

CHAPTER VIII

A DELAY OF THREE MONTHS

WHEN Dick came down to breakfast in the sunny court opening off the *salle-à-manger,* the only table vacant was one next that of the family party which had been so close to him at the Opera the night before. Fate surely was playing very curious tricks with him just now, and the feeling was confirmed before many minutes were over.

"Aunt Elsa," the young man cried, as he opened an English newspaper; "Dot, listen: they have chosen our candidate."

"Chosen the candidate, and your Uncle Edward not presiding at the meeting," the elder lady protested indignantly. "Then they have chosen the wrong man, I am sure."

Her nephew smoothed out the local journal. "Two columns of his speech," he said; "six lines about the decision, and half a column about the fellow himself." He began to read out the half column.

Dick rose with decision.

"You will pardon my interference," he said, "but I could not help hearing what you were reading, and I felt I could not in fairness to you let the matter go further without warning you that the adopted candidate, Richard Forster, is myself."

"What a lark!" was the irrepressible comment, and he impulsively introduced his aunt, Mrs. Ottoway, his sister Dorothy Wason and himself. "James, as I was christened, Jim, as I am generally called."

"You are better known to me by name," Dick answered imperturbably, "than I am to you; for I am well aware that my success at the polls will depend largely on how far I can command the support of Mr. Bruce, the chair-

man of my Conservative Association, and of Mrs. Ottoway."

The elder lady showed her marked approval by the most genial smile.

"I even hope," Dick proceeded, "to enlist the services of Miss Wason."

"Now, then, Dot," cried her brother, "it is your turn to say something." But the polite bow of the Parliamentary candidate had deprived Dot of speech. "And where do I come in?" he added, laughing.

Dick measured his broad shoulders and athletic figure. "You, Mr. Wason," he said quietly, "will be very useful in throwing out disturbers of my meetings, I am sure."

"Right-ho."

When breakfast was over he declined Jim Wason's invitation to join his sister and himself in sight-seeing. Instead he devoted three-quarters of an hour to a suave *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Ottoway, and when he left her to keep his appointment with Gertrude Wyatt that good lady was under the delusion that she had satisfactorily put the candidate through his facings and laid bare his inmost soul. But those who knew Richard Forster would have judged from the angle of his cigar and the corners of his mouth that he, too, was eminently content with the result of a dull conversation. He, in short, had extracted more useful information than he had hoped, and his opinion of Mrs. Ottoway's character and capacities was summed up in the three words of an unexpressed judgment, "vain old fowl."

Gertrude Wyatt received him in a deserted salon, and Dick found himself comparing her unconsciously with the slim, tall child in the holland skirt who had stolen away from breakfast as if she feared to shake his hand.

"The matter is very simple," Gertrude began. "I have ventured to ask your advice because I have no one else to consult. Mamma's opinion"—she sat down—"is the opinion of a very conventional mother in a very conventional world."

Dick waited in silence.

"For the second time," Gertrude went on calmly, "I have been asked by a man to marry him. He is only two or three years older than I am. I have known him for a very long time, ever since, indeed, I was in short frocks. He is rich and a model of conduct. Mamma wishes me to accept, but I should like to know first what you think."

Dick was so surprised that he let his gloves fall. Gertrude waited till he had recovered them.

"I should explain," she added very deliberately, "that money is an important consideration. I have been the cause of making mamma, I fear, very extravagant. Before long it will be impossible for us to spend as much in the future as we have done in the past. But do not imagine mamma wishes me to sell myself." She looked at him calmly. "I like the man who has asked me to be his wife very much."

"Like?" Dick questioned slowly. "Is liking enough for a young lady in these cases?"

"Let me say, then," Gertrude replied, "that I like him as much as I shall probably like any man." Her eyes met his with a cool challenge.

"Why, then, hesitate?"

She picked a tiny thread of cotton from her knee. "For two reasons: first, because, while I like him, I do not admire him. He will never be more than a respectable and respected country gentleman; secondly, because"—she rose and walked towards the fireplace—"I am not sure that I might not meet someone whom I should like equally well and who might, with my help, become perhaps a great man."

"You had better," he said slowly, "ask him to wait."

"Is that fair to him, Mr. Forster?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am only considering you, Miss Wyatt," he replied. "I don't know the gentleman, but if he loves you——"

"He says he does. So far as a girl can judge, he speaks with sincerity."

"Then I guess he would prefer to wait rather than be refused outright."

"And the money and mamma?"

"Mrs. Wyatt has not asked me to consider her," he replied, smiling. "And if poverty affects the gentleman in question, why, you'd better say 'no' right now."

"It will have no effect on him. I am certain of that. But it may affect me."

Dick looked her all over. "No," he replied with quiet conviction. "Poverty can do you no harm that you need consider."

"That is a real compliment." Her fingers played on the mantelshelf. "But there is my mother," she said, after a pause. "I am not so selfish as not to think what poverty may mean for her—poverty from which I can spare her."

"Is it not also a daughter's duty to spare her mother from other things besides poverty—a marriage that may not be her daughter's real happiness."

"That," Gertrude pronounced, "is just the problem. I had hoped you might have solved it, but I see I have simply troubled you to no purpose. Do not think, however, I am not very grateful for your kindness—the kindness of a real friend." She held out her hand.

"Wait three months," he answered suddenly. "Things, perhaps, will be clearer by that time."

"And when the three months are over?"

"If they are no clearer, then say 'yes.'"

Her eyes rested on him. "Very well. I will wait three months."

Once out in the street he paused and rubbed his chin. Had Gertrude asked him last night for his advice he would have spoken very differently; he would, in fact, have asked her to consider another alternative—himself. This morning, confronted with the necessity of a decision sprung on him unawares, he had taken refuge in a singularly futile delay. It did not please him at all to know that there was another man whose rivalry was so dangerous. And now

the girl herself had warned him with a plainness as unconventional as it was unmistakable. He resented neither the unconventionality nor the frankness. Indeed he left the room with a higher opinion of her than when he had entered. Why, then, had he not responded to her unconventionality by a similar frankness? As he lit a cigar he knew the reason: simply because, like herself, apparently, he had suddenly realised how uncertain his own mind was, and how distasteful it was to pledge himself in any way. And as he strolled back to his hotel he grimly reflected that in three months at most, by his own suggestion, the future of Gertrude and himself must be definitely settled. Such is Fate. Whence had come that strange impulse—the desire at all costs to postpone the decision? Had it not come since last night, since morning, perhaps? Had it not been prompted, maybe, by the accident of the breakfast-table? or was that too absurd?

And while Richard Forster was thus highly dissatisfied with the sudden way in which this initiative had been by a freak of chance wrested from him, Gertrude was walking up and down the salon equally dissatisfied. She had told the simple truth. She had honestly desired advice. But she had naturally not laid bare the main motives of her action. They were two. She desired to make Dick understand exactly what the position was, even at the risk of forfeiting his respect. And she felt that in this she had succeeded beyond her hopes. She had not forfeited his respect. But she had also desired to test herself. And it was the result of this effort that set her walking to and fro with feverish energy, for it was no longer possible now to conceal from that ruthlessly frank insight into her own ambitions and feelings which was, perhaps, her chief characteristic, the real nature of her feelings about Dick. When the door had closed upon him she recognised almost with bitter indignation that this man held her life, her future, her jealously-prized independence in the hollow of his hand; and that it was no longer a question of bal-

ancing calmly the self-surrender of marriage against the compensation that a husband might bring; that he had only to ask—rather to demand as of right—all that her womanhood could give, and she must grant it freely, readily, joyfully. She could stipulate for nothing in return: nothing of the conditions she had dreamed of; nothing but the one boon—that she might perhaps be to him and his life what he could, must be, to hers. And if he did not ask? What if in the next three months another woman stepped into Dick's life and seemed to promise what she was so ready now to lay at his feet—devotion, loyalty, service of body and brain? What if there was another woman already? Gertrude recognised now in a cruelly clear flash that in this daily competition of man with man and woman with woman, what prevails so often is just what a world, blind to human experience, persists in ignoring—not beauty of face or body; not power nor quality of brain, though these play their part, but that unanalysable sympathy, that mysterious bond that can unite two human natures, which, for lack of better words, we call love. She had for two years been exerting her powers to solve a problem. Dick's strength and coldness, his ambitions and his self-restraint, had been a challenge to many women, a challenge to herself. To inspire a passion in such a man had given her a new interest in life, in him and in herself, and it had ended in leaving him apparently cold, strong and ambitious as ever, and herself now mastered by the passion she had striven to inspire. Love! Love as a passion in woman robbing her of independence—how she had despised it! And she only felt it now as an invincible desire to win this man for herself, to make him feel for her what she felt for him. Love as the woman's privilege; as a spiritual power demanding self-sacrifice and self-surrender in order to sweeten and enrich; love the mysterious gift yet requiring to be won;—this love she still deliberately rejected as an unintelligible superstition, suited for her weaker sisters. In three months Dick must belong to her, else she had lost

him for ever, and the mere thought of so cruel a blow fired her alternately with a fierce despair and a fierce determination.

Forster, indeed, soon had had a new direction given to his thoughts. The waiter brought him a card, and the card was followed by a tall man with hungry and shifty eyes.

"I heard you were in Paris, so I've tracked you down," the newcomer said.

"What's the new scheme?" was the laconic question. The two men evidently knew each other well and wasted no words.

"A really fat thing." He plunged straightway into elaborate technical details to which Dick listened attentively.

"It's no use," he said, when the explanation was finished. "You'd better have a drink and then try someone else. I don't doubt the fat, but I've given up fat. It don't suit me any longer."

The visitor, with persuasive energy, began to recapitulate.

"No," Dick said firmly. "I am not playing with finance any more."

"Do you mean you are done with business?"

"That's what I mean."

"It's politics, exclusively, for the future?"

He nodded.

The visitor took the offered whisky and soda, which he sipped slowly.

"There are pretty good pickings ahead," he remarked, "and we want a big solid man in with us. You are that man if you only choose."

"I daresay; but I don't choose. There are plenty of big, solid men besides me to whom the pickings will appeal. Get one of them."

The visitor accepted a cigar, with a sigh of discontent. "Your local boss, Bruce," he said slowly, "has consented to come in."

"Yes?" Dick betrayed no interest in the information.

"He is so convinced, that he has taken shares for his nephew and niece, his wards."

"Why shouldn't he? Fat is good for the young. I, unfortunately, am no longer young."

"Look here, Forster, it would help you in your constituency to stand in with Bruce and work the scheme together."

"Perhaps—perhaps not. But politics and a new constituency already give me more than I can manage. But"—he rose—"I don't want to make any more money, and henceforward politics, not finance, is to be my line. Rope in someone else. You can't rope me in, that's all."

When the man had at last left him, Forster sat quite still, with the air of a financier who was dozing, thoroughly bored by the interview through which he had just passed. Presently he strolled down to the hall, where he sought a financial newspaper. Looking up carelessly, his eye fell on Dorothy Wason, reading in a corner, completely ignorant of his presence. He watched her for some minutes as if the sight of that small brown shoe, the tiny posy of flowers at her breast, the careless grace in the angle of her hat, fitted with remarkable harmony into his thoughts. Suddenly she too looked up carelessly. A swift, faint blush, a still fainter smile greeted him. But he simply raised his hat and left the hall. Ten minutes later he had despatched a telegram in cipher to his confidential secretary, which ran as follows:

"Procure, and send as soon as possible, a copy of the will of the late Arthur James Wason of Hazeldene Manor, Surrey. Find out the extent of the holding of Edward Bruce in the White Lead Syndicate, and transmit all information available as to the Syndicate and its promoters. Also advise London and New York Financial Corporation to keep me fully informed as to proposed mortgage."

CHAPTER IX

THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN

PARIS became hotter, and Dick was kept there much longer than he expected and liked by unforeseen complications in the business that had brought him over. Paris now presented itself as an insufferable hole, which the fetters of fate would not let him leave altogether. So in despair he allowed a flaming advertisement at a railway station to tempt him to the Normandy coast, whence he could easily return when business called. But a morning at Plage-sur-Mer had speedily convinced him that if he had changed his climate he had not changed his mood. This fashionable, crowded watering-place was more tiresome than the boulevards of Paris. His hotel was beyond criticism; but for a man who could sleep, if required, head downwards in a coal-cellar, luxury was irrelevant. The faultless cooking had no charm for one to whom meals were at best an inevitable interruption of his leisure. The toilettes of French women left him cold. The English and American women who tried to imitate them were only spoiling good clothes, for they did not know how to wear them, and they would have been better to have remembered that Nature when she deals with womanhood will always beat Art. To sit on the sands with a pair of opera-glasses and watch the bathers might be the occupation of a child or a *roué;* it could have no attraction for Richard Forster the financier. And the other amusements of the place, motoring, lawn-tennis, golf, might appear reasonable if you could persuade yourself that hitting a ball with a stick over burnt-up grass or motoring along dusty roads in a macintosh and goggles were tolerable forms of relaxation. At his solitary *déjeûner* Dick summed up his impressions by saying to himself that the sun was nearly as hot as at Paris, that

the glare on the Boulevard Maritime was far worse, that the sea was a monotonous blue green, that the sky was a hackneyed blue dappled with fleecy clouds, and that the world was far too full of women. Their vanity, their extravagance, their affectation, their ceaseless tongues and their multitude, combined to make the world impossible. But what was he to do? Return to London? The very thought of the city and his cell in Bloomsbury was repulsive. Work? He did not want to work. He was tired of working. He had had enough of work. Pleasure was what he desired, and it was not to be found. With means to indulge every whim, with every kind of pleasure, lawful and unlawful, at his elbow, he could not procure an hour's relief from *ennui*. For the moment, indeed, he seriously contemplated squandering some of the wealth this detestable work had brought him in the most conventional dissipation. At Plage-sur-Mer the varied anodynes which human experience has copied from one generation to another were, as at Monte Carlo, at the disposal of a full purse. Nor were they unknown to him. Dick had acquired his experience as well as his moderation in a hard school, and he had learned exactly what such palliatives can do. They could not pluck the rooted cause from the sick mind's discontent. And he recognised perfectly what was the real trouble. He had simply relapsed into the condition from which he had suffered two years before in London. He no longer knew what he wanted, he no longer knew where he was going, nor why. After all, did it matter? In three months Fate would have settled for him, Fate and Gertrude Wyatt.

A stroll after lunch unexpectedly provided some fresh material for reflection. He had looked in at the Casino. A few visitors were playing at the "*Petits Chevaux*," and just as he had watched the real gamblers at Monte Carlo, so now he idly surveyed these amiable amateurs. Suddenly a gleam shot into his bored eyes. That man in the light grey suit and Panama straw hat, with the little pile

of five-franc pieces, a sheet of paper and the stump of a pencil, was his friend, "the real gambler." Dick smiled as he observed his sunburnt face, his genial English manner and his complete absorption in his pastime. "So," he smilingly said to himself as he left the Salle des Petits Chevaux. "So." Edward Bruce and the "Little Horses" had set him thinking with considerable energy.

But as he walked, a greater surprise was in store for him. The band was playing in front of the Casino restaurant and Dick stopped to listen. Another gleam shot into his eyes and he moved at once from his place. Amongst the visitors who were dotted about on their chairs sat a couple that attracted his attention. The woman was a Parisian, dressed with the most elaborate care, but Dick paid no heed to her. Her companion was obviously an American, a stout, coarse-featured, middle-aged man, with "Commerce" writ large on face and figure, eyes slightly bloodshot and tired, a chin of considerable power, and great, greedy, grasping hands clasped on the handle of his ivory-headed walking-stick. A diamond ring sparkled on one of his fingers, another diamond in the pin of his tie. When Dick had made sure that he was not mistaken, he gave a glance at the woman. If he was surprised to see the man, he was evidently not in the least surprised to see the kind of companion to whom he was chatting so affably.

When he returned to his hotel for a cup of tea, Edward Bruce was no longer in his mind. "So," he was saying to himself, "John P. Steer has come up again. That's curious. I wonder what has brought him over to this side."

And about the same time Mr. John P. Steer, known once as the Aluminium King, was reflecting also, as he sipped a *fine champagne* and smoked his cigar. He, too, had seen a face that afternoon that he knew, and the sight had made him moisten his cracked and sensual lips; it had left his eyes somewhat less tired and dissipated, but rather more bloodshot than before. But it did not make him so

agreeable a talker to the handsome lady in the wonderful seaside toilette, whose name and history were very well known to the *flâneurs* and *bons viveurs* of the boulevards of Paris, now sunning themselves at Plage-sur-Mer.

Dick continued to reflect on John P. Steer over his tea until the waiter brought him the day's mail. And he betook himself to the cliffs, to study his papers in the coolness of the sea-breeze. He could be alone there, for the simple pleasure of walking on the sun-scorched turf was not one that commended itself to the pleasure seekers at Plage-sur-Mer. He had the cliffs to himself—no, not quite, for yonder the flutter of a white skirt warned him that one of the many superfluous women who annoyed him below had also selected the deserted uplands and was now standing, limned against the sky-line, with her hat off, apparently fascinated by a seagull, poised on outstretched wings, taking its pleasure down the wind. Dick rubbed his chin, hesitated, and then advanced briskly. "Good-evening, Miss Wason," he remarked pleasantly. "You and I have found the one tolerable spot in this overrated place. But please don't let me disturb you."

The girl had scrambled up, hat in hand, and faced him, shyly blushing, her brown hair blowing over her forehead.

"You were reading?" he continued—"poetry, too? That is also good. May I see what kind of poetry you like?" She handed him the volume with shy reluctance. "Swinburne," he said gently, "and a poem I don't know —'To a Sea-Mew.' That sounds inviting—ah!

> "'Ah, well were I for ever,
> Would'st thou change lives with me,
> And take my song's wild honey
> And give me back thy sunny
> Wild eyes that never weary
> And wings that search the sea!'

By Jove! the fellow knows what he is talking about,

doesn't he?—and it's so simple when a real poet puts it into half a dozen lines." He looked out seawards where the seagull was now beating up into the heart of the fresh northeast wind that was biting the blue-green sea into myriad foamy crescents. "I have watched seagulls often, but it never occurred to me before that it was their eyes that never wearied and their wings that searched the sea. However, it is so, isn't it?"

Dot was eyeing him with marked astonishment. "You read poetry?" she asked, as if she were interrogating herself.

"It's not wrong, is it?" he retorted, smiling. "Money-grubbers like myself surely need all the poetry the real poets can give us." He turned over the page and read the poem from the beginning. "Yes, I would rather have written that than get into Parliament."

"But," she began, checked herself, and then said, "Why?"

"Ah, why?—why indeed? You, Miss Wason, perhaps, would rather get into Parliament."

"Perhaps." Her fear of this man, whose wonderful career was the talk of her uncle and brother, was rapidly vanishing. "Yes," she pushed back her hair, "I would rather be a great statesman than a great poet."

"Why?" How different his eyes were, Dot was thinking, when he smiled. "May I know your reasons?"

She threw up her head. "I am a woman," she said: "I haven't any."

Dick laughed outright. This slim girl with the wind-blown hair and the innocent eyes scarcely suggested the idea of womanhood. "Have you not," he said, "really given the reason which the world has tried to explain away for countless centuries and always failed?" He stopped. "Another book? May I see what is the proper companion to Swinburne?"

Dot's eyes were dancing with demure merriment, and she broke into a laugh at his intense surprise. "John

Stuart Mill on *The Subjection of Women*," he said slowly. "Miss Wason, this calls for explanation."

"I hope you think it's a stupid book," she answered. "I believe the writer was a very wise and a very clever man, but——" She stopped.

"But?——"

"But he forgot"—her tone was half-gay, half-serious, —"that it is better for women to be in subjection to men than in subjection to other women."

"I fancied he desired them to be in subjection to no one, but to win the independence that is their right."

Dot looked out to sea. "Independence," she murmured. "Mr. Forster, do you believe that there can be such a thing as an independent woman? Surely she would cease to be a woman."

"Let us sit down," Dick replied, "before I put my next question."

They sat down accordingly, with Swinburne and John Stuart Mill as chaperons, and Dick regretfully wished that his companion would not seem to prefer the sea, for the shy glances that she threw from time to time were so delightfully naïve and provocative.

"Why cannot a woman," he began, "make herself as independent as a man without doing herself any harm?"

Her answer was long in coming. "But a man," she said at last, "cannot make himself independent either."

"You really believe that?"

Dot nodded.

"Is it any use asking for a reason?"

She pulled up a tiny bit of turf. "I mean," she explained, "that he ought not to make himself independent."

"And our great statesman, for example, on whom is he dependent?"

"On his mother, first of all——"

"And," Dick questioned slowly, "supposing he hasn't got a mother and never had one?"

Dot played with the bit of turf. "I think," she said

in a low voice, "he ought to find someone to take her place."

For some minutes they both watched the evening light beginning to silver the broken gold and olive of the sun-lit waves. "And the woman?" he said at last; "on whom is she always to be dependent?" But she had nothing to say. "On her husband perhaps?" he suggested.

Dot suddenly faced him. "Perhaps," she said. "But it would be better if she were dependent always on herself. Only," she added, with the faintest shrug of the shoulders, "with nine girls out of ten that is fortunately, or unfortunately, impossible."

"Pray, why?"

She rose with a light laugh and shook the dust from her white skirt. "Because," she said, with a shy upward glance, "because nine girls out of ten haven't a self. It has to be created for them."

"And the tenth?"

"Is a beast." She laughed again. "Is my hat straight, please?—because I am going back to the hotel, and if it isn't, Aunt Elsa will say it's the fault of John Stuart Mill."

"Or mine?"

"Oh, no. I am sure you like women, Mr. Forster, to have their hats on straight and their shoe-laces always nicely tied."

"Certainly, but I prefer them," he said, promptly going down on one knee, "when they are sufficiently dependent on man for the nice tying."

Dot was still smiling at the swiftness with which he and not she had detected the fault in her shoe. The wind rustled open the pages of *The Subjection of Women,* and a familiar name in a familiar hand could be read on the inside of the cover.

"Miss Wyatt is a friend of yours," he said quickly, unable to check the surprise—or was it annoyance?—in his voice.

"You know her, too?" she questioned. "How curious! Of course, I saw you in her box at the Opera. Do you remember?"

Dick assented with a smile, reflecting that it was more curious that in two years of familiar intimacy Gertrude Wyatt had never spoken to him of Dorothy Wason, and also had never spoken to Dorothy Wason of Richard Forster. She had not even taken the trouble to inform him that she was acquainted with the family party that night at *Carmen*.

"Is the Swinburne hers, too?" he asked.

"Oh, no. Gertrude doesn't approve of my reading Swinburne. She always says that girls are naturally far too sentimental, and that Swinburne and poets like him aggravate the worst kinds of sentimentality in them."

"And Mill is the corrective?"

She nodded. "You see, I need correctives very badly," she added. "But Gertrude's correctives only make me more sentimental than ever, and then I make her almost as angry as she does me."

"Are you angry with her just now?"

"Not angry—rather, sad." She looked at Dick walking beside her, and his face inspired a confidence. "She won't marry the man I want her to marry."

"Don't you think, Miss Wason, that Miss Wyatt may have very good reasons for not doing what you want?"

"But it's her reasons that make me sad, not her refusing."

"Ah!"

They walked on in silence.

"Mr. Forster, do you think," she said suddenly, "that a woman ought to refuse to marry a man simply because he is not clever enough?"

"I suppose," he answered, smiling, "that depends on whether a woman can or cannot fall in love with brains, and brains alone. I can't answer that. Perhaps you can, Miss Wason."

"I am sure that, if I were a man, I should be sorry to think that my wife had married me for my brains alone. It would be as sordid as marrying a man for his money."

"But brains can last a good deal longer than most other things, can't they? They can even create sometimes what money cannot, that self in another person which you told me so many girls need."

Dot looked at him reflectingly. "No," she said firmly, "I don't, and I can't, believe that."

They had reached the hotel. "Then if brains can't, what can?" Forster demanded.

She put down her parasol. Her reply lingered at the corner of her mouth.

"Three up and two to play," cried her brother cheerily, advancing to meet them. "The best and the last game I shall have at Plage-sur-Mer."

Dot turned. "Ask Jim for the answer, Mr. Forster," she said, with a teasing smile. "He has been in love fifty times. He is in love now and has just won the club foursome medal with the prettiest girl in the hotel."

"Because you haven't an answer of your own," Dick retorted.

"Perhaps I have, perhaps I haven't; anyway, I am not going to say now."

The white skirt and the straw hat with the roses in it had slipped away, and he was left alone with an elated and love-sick golfer. But to Dot's surprise he spent at least three-quarters of an hour chatting to the victor, and when the conversation was over, Dick walked to the telegraph office and despatched two telegrams, one to his confidential clerk and the other to Kitty. Dot, who was dressing for dinner, caught a sight of his face as he returned, but only to leave a message and then step briskly away in the direction of his own hotel.

"I wish," she said to herself, with a vicious twist at her hair, "I wish Jim had asked him to dinner. It is a pity he should think I must always be either a sentimental schoolgirl or a minx."

CHAPTER X

THE REAL GAMBLER

GERTRUDE WYATT put down the note she was reading, a note from the Travellers' Club, looked at her watch and rang the bell. "I shall want the carriage at a quarter to six," she said to the parlour-maid. "If Sir Guy Lemare calls before that, I will see him; but I am not at home to anyone else." She paused. "Take all those lilies away; the scent of them is intolerable. This is not a florist's shop or a middle-class drawing-room."

"But Mrs. Wyatt——" the maid began.

"You can bring them back if Mrs. Wyatt misses them." She took up her book, and was reading with her customary calm absorption in the business of the moment when Sir Guy was announced.

"I had no idea you were in England until your note arrived," was her greeting. "I thought you were on the Zambesi."

"I only arrived this morning, and in forty-eight hours I shall be sailing for South America."

"Then it is very good of you to come to see us at all."

"Shall I never succeed in making you believe that there is only one person in London whom I ever want to see?"

"I should have thought, after fifteen months, any white woman's society would have been acceptable. But don't, please, spoil an unexpected pleasure for me by dragging in old controversies." She handed him his tea with a charming smile of welcome, and while he drank it she rested comfortably against the sofa in her favourite corner, conscious that the shaded drawing-room, absolutely free from the conventional photographs, and all the flummery and knick-knacks dear even to educated and refined women, with its plain furniture, its simple grey paper, and its two or three pictures severely "low in tone," was just the background for the Greek lines of her figure and the in-

tellectual dignity and beauty of her head. To Sir Guy, fresh from the heart of Central Africa, this girl, in her cool white dress, was a vision that it would be a privilege to be allowed to admire for ever.

"Then you really are not sorry to see me," he asked.

"It would have been easy to shut the door in your face," she answered: "Of course I am glad to see you." Their eyes met, and Sir Guy would have waded across a river swarming with crocodiles had she bidden him. Gertrude knew her power, of course; he was not the only man who had sat in humble adoration in front of that sofa, and she had no intention of letting Sir Guy fall under another woman's control, just yet. "And now, tell me all that you have been doing."

He would have liked to have talked of other things, but by judicious flattery and a few flashes of genuine interest she slowly freed the real man, the traveller, from the swathes of that stupid frockcoat. Sir Guy, when he had reached the Zambesi, forgot to be, as he was in Piccadilly, the starched and priggish representative of an Eton and Oxford training. His bronzed face and eyes began to glow as he related incident after incident; and when he finished with an allusion to the marked appreciation by "some of the big geographical men" of the material that this and his other travels were providing, she rewarded him by showing her marked approval too.

"Won't they ask you to lecture?" she inquired.

"Yes; I am to give two lectures at the Royal Geographical when I return from South America. It is a great compliment."

"But not more than you deserve." She held out a frank hand of comradeship and congratulation, which he raised to his lips. "But you mustn't be sentimental. Honestly, I want you to succeed more and more. I like to think the men I admire"—her eyes swept over him—"are steadily going up the ladder. I am an ambitious woman, and womanlike I prefer to see my ambitions realised by others, particularly by men."

"Gertrude," he came up to her, "cannot you say that there is some chance?"

"Why are you going to South America? If I am to you what you say, why run away as soon as you return?"

"Because, to be in London, in England, and to know, to feel, that in your company I am only one of fifty, perhaps a hundred men, is intolerable. If you only would recognise that some men who really love must either kill their despair by action—action, danger, anything—or know that the woman they love is really theirs. To see you daily and to be starved with polite words, a smile, to be confronted daily with those others who also win the smile, and perhaps more, is torture, worse than torture. Only tell me that perhaps you will come to love me, and South America can go to the bottom of the sea."

"I cannot tell you that," she said quietly, "—yet."

"Yet?"—he stepped forward—"Gertrude——"

"Perhaps never, and I think you had better go to South America—for the present."

Her smile puzzled him. "Will you answer one question?" She nodded. "Is there anybody else whom you like better?"

"No." Then she added—"I cannot say more." Her pity—was it pity?—was moved by his dull despair. "Come back in three months. I shall know for certain then."

"Then it does not depend on you," he questioned, surprised.

"In three months I promise to give you my final answer. And"—she held up a playfully warning finger—"don't in the meanwhile despair. I am not a woman to be won—no woman, indeed, ever is—by despair."

She moved over to her writing-table. "When you come again, do wear your travelling clothes," she said. "See, I have a picture of you here, cut out of an illustrated paper. If ever I fall in love with Sir Guy Lemare, that is the Sir Guy who will win my heart. I sometimes think I am a little bit in love with the man in the picture, but"—she turned laughingly—"I can never fall in love with

that," she pointed at his frockcoat and white waistcoat,—"oh, never. *Bon voyage!*"

The parlour-maid came in to announce the carriage. Gertrude was reflecting carefully, as if arriving slowly at an important decision.

"By the way, isn't Buenos Ayres in South America?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Will you do me a favour?" He came promptly to the writing-table, all beaming attention. "A piece of pure curiosity. Years ago, in New York, mamma knew a man called Mr. Hennessy——"

Sir Guy started sharply. "Tom Hennessy?" he demanded.

"I think that was the name. Mamma would know, but she is out. Did you know him too?" She was speaking carelessly, but she was scrutinising him very closely, as if to ascertain exactly the effect of every word so carelessly uttered, so carefully chosen.

"I knew a Tom Hennessy. He was a college friend of mine—a great friend. I last saw him in New York years ago. But I was informed he was dead. My friend's life was not very happy."

"I think it must be the same. Mamma's Mr. Hennessy, too, was anything but happy. Women are responsible for much." She checked herself deliberately. "Anyway, mamma heard the other day that her Mr. Hennessy was living in Buenos Ayres in great poverty."

"Tom Hennessy living in Buenos Ayres in poverty! Is it possible? May I ask how you heard this?"

Gertrude drew herself up. "I would rather not go into details," she said quietly. "They are not exactly such as a girl can discuss with freedom. You and I agree on that point cordially. But mamma has good reason for her belief. Perhaps, if you are in Buenos Ayres, you might make inquiries and let us—let me know. You might, also, if the information is correct, be able to give Mr. Hennessy some help."

"Of course. Help?—I should rather think so. I shall go straight to Buenos Ayres." He began to button on a glove. "Shall I write to Mrs. Wyatt or to you?"

"As you please." She smilingly replaced the paper cutting in a drawer. "But I may say that I should always value a letter to myself, with news not only about Mr. Hennessy. I might even be tempted to answer it."

"Then I shall write to you," he said promptly.

"Thank you." His promptness seemed to please her. "Of course, if it were important you would telegraph."

"Important?" He was puzzled again.

"In this way," Gertrude explained, locking the drawer with a careless jangle of keys. "Mamma met a Mrs. Barclay in London the other day. She, too, seemed to be much interested in Mr. Hennessy—at least mamma was told so."

"Barclay—a woman called Mrs. Barclay?"—he ransacked his memory. "I don't remember the name amongst Tom's friends."

"Mr. Hennessy seems to have had a good many women friends," Gertrude said indifferently, "and this Mrs. Barclay was once a very great friend of his, I believe. I should like," she added, with a slow smile, "to be able to inform her that the friend she lost is really alive, and might, with your help and mine, perhaps, Sir Guy, come back from poverty and Buenos Ayres."

"If I find him," he said, "I shall certainly telegraph. Will you then cable back any instructions?"

"Yes. And now I really must go and put on my hat. *Bon voyage*—for three months!"

She glided from the room, leaving Sir Guy, more in love than ever, to find his way into the street and to strive in vain to recollect if he had ever met a woman of the name of Barclay. But he completely failed, and for an excellent reason. The woman he knew only too well, but on the last occasion on which he had seen her, two years ago, she had maliciously called herself Wilson. Had Gertrude Wyatt told him, as she well might have done, that

her Christian name was Kitty, a great many things which ultimately came to pass would probably not have happened. But it did not suit Miss Gertrude Wyatt's present purpose to say more than she had said, and as she surveyed herself in the glass to fasten her hat she was reflecting, with perhaps justifiable complacence, on the skill with which she had managed the recent interview. A beautiful girl with brains seldom fails to realise by the time she is fully a woman how tempting, and perhaps how dangerous, the combination of real brains and great beauty in a woman may be. And when, as is generally the case, the rare combination is fired by a remorseless ambition, the happy possessor will rapidly learn that life itself is a more enthrallingly fascinating form of gambling than any that the artificial wit of man can devise. She will also discover that of all the gambling with the fortunes and souls of men that life offers to the ambitious, the most tyrannical passion that can grip a human soul is that which drives a woman to gamble with her brains and her beauty and her health for love? A woman may gamble for a man's life, for his brains, for his power, for his future by deliberate choice; but if she is compelled to plunge her own love into the scales in order to play for his, it is not by choice. It is because she must, or forfeit the right to be the woman that a Nature beyond her control has been pleased to make her.

Gertrude Wyatt sat in the carriage with half-closed eyes as it rapidly took her to the Park, but once it had passed the Achilles Statue, she was scrutinising the men and women on foot as if she expected to see someone. A man in a grey frockcoat, amongst others, took off his hat, but Gertrude drove round once before she allowed the carriage to stop at the railings. She then saw the frockcoat leave its chair with some alacrity.

"I hope," she said, "you enjoyed your trip to Plage-sur-Mer, Mr. Steer."

"Very much indeed. I should have enjoyed it more had I persuaded Mrs. Wyatt and you to come too."

"I doubt it." Her eyes travelled to the chair that this stout, pasty-faced man with the fleshy, greedy hands had left. The compliment of leaving his companion to come to talk to her was, to a fastidious judgment, perhaps hardly as unqualified as it seemed. Ex-millionaires who propose to become millionaires again, are entitled, perhaps, to a double allowance of charity. "But if I could not go to Plage-sur-Mer, I was able to make the acquaintance of one who was once a friend of yours."

"A woman?"

"You haven't many men friends, Mr. Steer. Financiers, I suppose, only need women friends." She turned lazily. "There she is, curiously enough. I fancy she has forgotten you. Have you forgotten her?"

"By God!" he exclaimed, between his teeth. "Kitty Hennessy. Who'd have——"

"Her name is not Hennessy: it's Barclay—Mrs. Barclay."

Steer examined the girl's impassive features, to discover how much she knew; but this smiling young lady's face was a mask he quite failed to penetrate.

"Pardon my brusqueness," he said, "but what exactly is your game?"

Gertrude laughed. "I like brusqueness," she said, "in men. But you flatter me; I haven't a game. I am merely the looker-on. Perhaps, too, there isn't a game yet; but Fate may make one, and in that case the game will concern you, I fancy, Mr. Steer."

He surveyed her, his look now eloquent of undisguised admiration, as much for the proofs of her cleverness as for her feminine charm. To Steer, human beings were simply a matter of price; but in settling this, when he had to deal with women, character and habit invariably persuaded him to gild the transaction by an element of gallantry, which he prided himself conveyed both the experience and the homage of the man of the world,—in reality made him appear as a doubly-nauseous compound of the slave-buyer and the stud-groom. And at that moment a

subtle judge of women would have detected in Gertrude's calm tolerance the aversion and contempt that she could not altogether suppress.

"You know Mrs. Barclay?" he said slowly. "Then you probably also know one Richard Forster?"

"Very well indeed."

Again he completely failed to penetrate the mask. Nor had he himself adequately under control. The fiery hatred that the name Forster evoked would have been obvious to a novice in the study of character.

"Let us talk about something else," she said pleasantly. "You are a financier, give me your advice. I have been recommended to take some shares in a new venture, the White Lead Syndicate. I am a poor woman, I want to make a little money. Shall I take those shares?"

"Who advised you?"

"The uncle of a friend of mine, Mr. Bruce."

"Bruce? H'm." Gertrude was puzzling him completely. Was this girl a fool, a knave, or an emissary of crafty enemies?

"I am inclined to believe in the White Lead Syndicate," she pursued easily. "You are going to see it through, are you not, Mr. Steer?"

"Now, who told you that?" he rasped out, once more taken off his guard.

"No one but yourself, and that just now," she answered, with the most provocative coquetry. "Come, you are really dealing with a very simple woman. I am not in financial circles—indeed I am a perfect ignoramus; but I want to make a little money. I don't object to a little gambling, but I can't afford to flutter and lose. Won't you give me some disinterested advice?" She leaned slightly forward. "I can be grateful for disinterested advice."

He moistened his cracked lips; it was a sign he was thinking hard. "I am not in the White Lead Syndicate," he said at last. "I haven't decided whether I am going into it or not. But," with great firmness, "don't touch it

at present. If I go in, that will be a very different bag of tricks. I will see, in that case, that you get your shares and a handsome profit."

"Thank you."

He came up close to the carriage. "By God!" he whispered, "I am a fool, for I have told you what I would have told to no other woman. But you are the finest woman I have yet struck. You are just the partner I want. Will you take a hand? There's the chance of a great game ahead and a safe one."

Gertrude measured him quietly. She was comparing him with Richard Forster and with Sir Guy Lemare, and she knew more about Mr. Steer than he dreamed. She was also feeling the thrill of the gambler who may have to stake all in order to win even a little. The horizon was widening faster than she liked, the field of battle becoming larger and more complicated than she expected. These financial Titans threatened to engulf her purely personal ambition in maelstroms in which an untrained girl could so easily be drowned. After all, she was only a woman playing for a man's love, prepared to play quite unscrupulously, but Fate unfortunately had made that man a financier. "I must think it over," she answered coolly.

"There's no hurry yet. But if you want money or," he paused, "something else, keep my relations to the syndicate a secret."

"A woman can keep a secret, when it is worth her while." He nodded confidently. Then she added lightly: "But I am sure of this. If you stand in with the syndicate, your enemies will either ruin you a second time, or ruin themselves. You understand?"

"I guess I do."

Gertrude drove away. Not till her figure had quite disappeared did his bloodshot eyes cease to follow her, and then he went back with reluctance to the companion he had deserted.

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CHAPTER XI

ROSES—RED AND WHITE

Dick stepped out of the train and the soft western air from Kerrera blew in his face. A glimpse of the sombre purple flecked with pastoral green of the Mull hills was flashed from behind the station, and the reflective thud, thud of steamers' paddles in the harbour echoed along the wind-swept platform. Strange to think, only twelve hours ago he had been driving under dim yellow gas-lamps through airless streets of London.

"So you've come at last." Never had Kitty looked so fresh and womanly. Her Celtic blood had responded to the gracious sovereignty of this western Scottish coast, for Nature here recognised her as a daughter of the race. "You poor old money-grubber, we shall soon soften your flinty heart. But why didn't you come sooner?"

"Politics and rogues. I had to run down and fill the feeding-bottle for the constituency and other things. But," his eyes twinkled, "who is 'we'?"

"Never mind. Go and get shaved and then come and talk to me. There's lots to say."

But Dick, having learned that "the others" were away to Dunstaffnage, made Kitty eat a second breakfast in his company, and her tongue babbled on of a fortnight's doings—Staffa and Iona, Glencoe and Ballachulish, Melfort and Loch Awe, and all the other wonderful things that are a possession for ever to the lovers of Oban.

"She is an adorable child," she wound up, "so innocent and simple. She even believes in me, believes that I am the same guileless, trusting, loyal, joyous kind of girl that she is herself."

"Perhaps you are," he interposed.

Kitty's eyes clouded with a soft pathos. "I was once.

I, too, once spoke straight out exactly what I thought, and was called a minx and a coquette for doing it. Why won't the world let the girls who don't want to be anything but girls remain untouched by the bitterness, the cursed bitterness and wickedness of knowledge and sorrow? I suppose Dot must——"

"Dot?" he interrupted.

"Yes, Dot," she smiled defiantly. "You have given me a new friend, and one who has done me more good than all your worldly sermons, sir."

Dick sipped his coffee, reflecting on the stroke of genius which had inspired his last move.

"When I got your telegram from Plage-sur-Mer," Kitty went on, "bidding me come here at once, I thought you had taken leave of your senses. But I have blessed you ever since. Pray, how did you learn that Dot and her brother were coming to Oban? Dot herself didn't know it when she talked to you about sea-mews and——"

"You women!" he broke in. "Kitty, on your oath, have you been bleating all sorts of rubbish about me into that child's ears?"

"Never mind. This is a free country. Surely I may answer sometimes a child's questions."

"No, no—because you can't tell the truth."

"That's just it," she retorted, smiling. "I can't tell the truth about you, Dick, and she wouldn't believe it if I did. Answer me. How did you know what Dot herself didn't?"

He laughed gently. "Her brother told me two and two," he said, "and I made it four for him, and sent you to see the result. It's elementary to a trained villain like myself."

"It's simply incredible, the way you twist everyone to your will. But," she added quite earnestly, "what is your plan now?"

"I'm going to take a holiday."

"No, that won't do. If it were Gertrude Wyatt or any

other of the five thousand on your trail who can protect themselves, I shouldn't move a finger. But I am not going to let you see Dot—I'm not joking—until I know that that innocent heart of hers is not going to be broken."

"Now don't be sentimental, Kitty, and absurd as well."

"That's just what I am going to be. More's the pity you can make any woman you please fall in love with you; most of the fools don't wait for your pleasing. But," she looked into his face, "Dot is different, and so long as I can I mean to keep her as she is—an innocent, God-fearing, trusting girl to whom love shall come once and once only. Love and her husband and her children will take her safely through this beastly world we've all got to face."

"You've been thinking again," Dick commented, with some justice.

"Yes. There's enough of a decent woman left in me to wish to spare that child what I've not been spared, to keep her from becoming what I have become. Most innocent girls must take their chance in the rough and tumble; many are not worth the care they get, but there are a few, a very few, whom every woman, if she values her womanhood, ought to fight for with all the weapons her sex and experience have provided."

Forster meditated afresh in silence on this speech. It seemed to him that Kitty was simply justifying the opinion he had always had of her, and these rare glimpses of a finer fibre unwarped by a bitter experience, these flashes of her hidden ideals within, were the most comforting balm to a man who hungered for a belief in the spiritual, but who was continually begin frustrated in his efforts to reach it by the pitiless, corrosive scepticism bred by the ceaseless competition of life, by the sinister influence of his own ambitions and the brutal strength of his own physical and mental powers. There was something also particularly touching in this plea for a girl, because her innocence was of that rare quality that it awoke the vision of the ideal and the spiritual in a woman's

heart. Innocence perhaps really appeals only to those men to whom women have given to eat the bitter fruit of knowledge, and who thereby win the belief that its beauty and worth lie not in its ignorance, but in its efficacy to develop a type of character proof against the world, the flesh and the devil. The innocence of childhood symbolises the charm of ignorance; but the innocence of womanhood may symbolise an acknowledged victory of the spiritual over the earthly and carnal.

"You need not be alarmed, Kitty," Dick said at length. "I hope I have too great a respect for Miss Wason to hurt even a hair of her head. Her interests," he smiled, "are already mine to a certain extent." Kitty flashed a questioning look. "I will explain later." He rose and put on his hat.

"She hasn't an idea that you are here, and she is, I believe, sketching on the Dunollie road, just past the castle," Kitty retorted. "I am going to write letters."

He sauntered along the bay. Men and women talked of fate and destiny, but in nine cases out of ten chance is only the inevitable result of a series of trifling acts, unobserved at the time, but none the less premeditated. At Plage-sur-Mer he had casually learned from Jim Wason that his sister and himself were about to spend July at Oban. The Wasons, particularly Dorothy Wason, for several reasons interested him. He had therefore telegraphed to Kitty to proceed to Oban and a hotel he named, and had virtually commanded her to use a tourist's right to make a fellow-tourist's acquaintance. She had obeyed promptly, as she always did, and now he too was here in Oban and could reap the fruits of his scheme if he chose. Yet he hesitated, counting the white steam-yachts, the tourists in the hired rowing-boats, the children paddling while papa smoked over the newspaper and mamma read a sixpenny novel. But when he had turned the corner where the new Ganavan road sweeps round the promontory under the ruins of that ancient and ivy-clad keep and

caught sight of a slim figure in the familiar hat with the roses in it sitting on the rocks—a girl, not sketching, but gazing quietly towards the sunlit Sound of Mull—he halted. The finger of Fate seemed to point warningly that the path now diverged in two opposite directions, and at the end of each sat a woman waiting. Dick watched a large yacht threshing out from the harbour, close-hauled against the western wind and the leaping tide. A couple of visitors to the castle above his head idly wondered why the man below them was drawing patterns with his stick in the dust and obliterating them as soon as they were drawn. Right under the promontory the yacht suddenly went about with a rattle of blocks and the hissing flutter of foresail and jib. Dick looked up, accepted the omen, and walked briskly down the road.

At the sound of his voice Dot started, and when they were shaking hands the colour in her cheeks was not all due to the caresses of the breath of the sea.

"You see," Dick was saying, "I have come for the answer that I failed to get at Plage-sur-Mer. Do you remember?"

"No. I have quite forgotten what the answer was to have been."

"Isn't that a pity?"

She laughed. "There is something much better than a girl's answer in Oban, Mr. Forster," she said. "There is that." She pointed at the Maiden's Island in front of them, and then waved her arm out at the gleaming islands in Loch Linnhe, etched in silver-point and gold against the grey-green sea and the long line of Morven. "Look at the light on Lismore,—look at the tide round the Lady's Rock, and when you have seen Cruachan from the sea you will admit I am right."

"I am beginning to think, Miss Wason, you are always right."

"Oh, please," she pleaded, "please, do forget all the nonsense I talked that afternoon. It was partly your fault

too. You provoked me into being a horrible little prig."

"I am afraid, Mr. Forster," she added, "you don't in the least know how silly girls can be. How could you?"

"How indeed? But there's no saying what this wonderful Oban may teach me. I may even write an essay on 'The Subjection of Men.'" He looked round. "I don't see our friend Mill, by the way."

"Mill is at the bottom of my box, smothered under flounces, as useless as he is here. Even Swinburne is only fit for wet days. But Mill—fancy bothering about women's rights in Oban. There's only one thing to be read—that!" Again she pointed seawards. "The hills and the water here," she continued, "are so divinely lovely. They are like the hair and eyes of your friend, Mrs. Barclay: the last half-hour in which you saw them you think the best, until the next half-hour comes. We shan't quarrel about her anyway, shall we?"

"I hope not. In any case I have brought a peace-offering with me." His voice deepened. "Yesterday was the fifteenth of July. I picked these for you." He handed her the roses he was carrying.

She took them carelessly enough, these white and red roses, a trifle withered, for she was watching the terns diving, and the sunlight on Lismore had suddenly shifted to throw through a fleecy cloud a magic and transparent violet veil over the hollows in the green flanks of the Mull hills, while baby squalls dusked and shivered in quivering ripples over the smooth eddies of the tide round the Lady's Rock.

"Ah!" She had recognised the roses. "Thank you!"

"I thought you would like to have them," he said simply.

Dot involuntarily turned away that he might not see the tears. When she looked round again, he was sitting a few yards off on a stone, throwing pebbles into the green water that lapped and gurgled in the tangle of seaweed on the rocks. The shy gratitude in her eyes was now delicately

chastened by the fear that is akin to reverence. It was as if she saw this man in a new light, and she knew that a girl's heart was beating as it had never beat before. For the fifteenth of July was the anniversary of her mother's death, and these red and white roses were from the tomb under the old yew tree and the grey tower of a Surrey parish church.

"I'm going to win the seat," Dick said cheerfully, and she was aware that he had thus thoughtfully prevented her from trying to find words for her feelings. "The fight will be fun, and I'm going to win."

"They all think so at home," she answered. "Your last speech seems to have made even Aunt Elsa enthusiastic. Uncle Edward sent a copy to Jim and me——"

"And you find time in Oban to read it. Wouldn't it be better with Mill under the flounces at the bottom of that box?"

"I hadn't any choice. Jim made me read it to Mrs. Barclay while he smoked himself to sleep. All the same," her eyes twinkled, "he said you were a nailer." Presently she turned rather shyly. "I wonder if you would answer a question?" she asked.

"I am a Parliamentary candidate. If it weren't for the flounces that smother women's wrongs, you would also be an elector. Put your question, Miss Wason."

"Do you really think England is in as bad a state as you said in that speech?"

Forster rose and stood over her. "That will take an hour to answer," he said, "an hour at least. Will you have it now, after lunch, or never?"

She looked up at him. "Now, please."

Much more than an hour passed, and Dot listened, looking most of the time either at her brown shoe or at the white lighthouse gleaming through friendly sunlight across the sea. Most expositions of a political creed would be more successful if Parliamentary candidates were required to speak from a platform of wave-washed rock to an au-

dience of one—a young woman whose eyes the speaker cannot see, but whose ear is bewitchingly small, and whose hair is slightly ruffled by the breath of the West, a hearer who once in a quarter of an hour will put her difficulty in an encouraging look and no more. Dick spoke with great simplicity and concentrated earnestness. At first he watched the effect with interest, then forgot the interest and gave Dot the best of himself. For her it was almost a paralysing experience. She had always been treated as the child at home, fit only for girlish things. But at Plage-sur-Mer, and now here, a man almost old enough to be her father, a man who had made his fortune by sheer force of brain and character, a great name in the world of finance, feared and respected by great men, courted by beautiful and powerful women, actually treated her as an equal, talked to her as if she, an inexperienced, ignorant creature who had recently learned to put her hair up, had as much right to an opinion as himself. It was so strange, so delightful, and so overpowering. She felt so proud and so humble while that restrained voice vibrated earnestly at her side. To-day, too, as at Plage-sur-Mer, he was so exactly like the memory of his face that a child at Monte Carlo had never forgotten. And all the time, sea and sky and hills did homage to the pageant of Highland summer, while those red and white roses lay in her lap and she kept recalling the look that had swept into a man's clear hazel eyes when he had offered her the most beautiful gift that was in any man's power to bestow.

At last he had finished. "They are rather frightened at headquarters," he said, "because my party, at heart you know, thinks that the only way to collar the democracy is to swear that we will give them more class tit-bits than the Liberals; but as the seat is looked on as hopeless, they're going to let me have a fling. And I'm going to persuade them that the England we all ought to believe in doesn't want programmes but a creed, and that you won't get it

until you give a blank cheque to a few men to hammer a new faith into the nation by action. If I win," he laughed a little, "the real job will begin—a blank cheque from the party."

Dot suddenly wheeled round. "Why do you call yourself an outsider?" she asked.

"That is another story," he smiled. "Biography this time and suitable only for a wet day."

"That is a promise. Parliamentary candidates must keep their promises."

"It would be better," said an interrupting voice, "if they didn't keep a ravenous kind-hearted brother from his lunch." Jim Wason was standing behind them. "Are you aware that it is ten minutes past two, and that Mrs. Barclay is fainting from fear and famine, and that two search parties are out looking for you? I am sorry, Mr. Forster, but to-morrow you will know better than to trust yourself to Dot alone."

Dick held up a warning finger. "My young friend, if you ever call me a nailer again I will inform Mrs. Ottoway of what you said to a golfing young lady at Plage-sur-Mer and of what she said to you."

"Which one? The girl who gave you her photograph or the girl who expected you to give her yours? Anyway that wasn't the really dangerous one. It's girls with blue eyes and fuzzy hair, Mr. Forster—keep clear of them. They put you in on a fast wicket and then bowl you a yorker which looks like a long-hop, and you're caught in the slips by mamma. I only like," he put his arm round his sister's waist, "the really mean sort who tell tales as soon as they are let out of school."

The rest of that day provided every member of that party of four with much to think about, and Dick meditated on it by himself in front of the hotel in company with the silvery twilight, the friendly lamps on the yachts in the bay and a cigar. A rustle and a light step on the gravel. Dick turned with a strange thrill of pleasure.

He was beginning to find that light step a welcome interruption.

"I couldn't thank you for the roses then," Dot began slowly, "but I shouldn't like you to—I should like to thank you now—may I?"

"I would rather you did not."

Standing in her white silk with that tiny pearl cross at her throat and lapped in the fairy ghostliness of the Northern night, she was the incarnation of fragrant girlhood.

"Would you be angry if I asked another question? Do you sometimes get roses like these?" she put a hand to her heart, where the roses lay.

"No;" he paused; and added, "you see I do not know where my mother is buried."

She stepped backwards in an awe-stricken silence. "Is it possible?" she faltered, to herself.

"Miss Wason, there are a great many things that I most sincerely hope you will never be asked to understand. Happiness, if you will allow me to say so—happiness——"

"Happiness," she interrupted, "is happiness everything even for a girl?"

"For some girls it ought to be."

"I don't want to be one of those girls," she said, with a passion that surprised him.

"Don't despise happiness," he said, after a pause; "a really happy girl is a much rarer thing than a really happy man."

"I can't believe that."

He paused again to add—"Will you let me prove it by asking for one of your roses?"

From under lashes wet by a tear came a divinely shy glance. Dot had taken a quick, deep breath of fear and joy. "Am I to choose?" she asked, hardly knowing what she said.

"Please."

She selected with trembling fingers, gave it to him,

and fled without waiting to say good-night. Her cheeks were still burning, her heart still beating fast, long after she heard Dick walk up the road to his hotel. Why did even unhappy thoughts make her feel so happy to-night? Why did she look forward with such fear and expectation to to-morrow? Why had Oban in a few short hours become a new world that set all that was best vibrating within her. She threw up her window and gazed into the bay. A few stars were creeping into the grey sky above Kerrera, and through the hush across the summer sea stole from the lights of the boats the clear bell from a steam yacht striking the seaman's hours. "I suppose," she murmured, "he has often asked a girl for a flower, and as often been given them. Girls!" she stamped her feet, "I am sure Kitty is in love with him and he ought to be in love with her." Then as she put her head on the pillow—"I wonder —I hope not."

CHAPTER XII

LOVE, THE GIFT

"SISTERS," said Jim Wason, filling his pipe and eyeing the remains of a picnic lunch, "sisters are a hollow and selfish fraud. The time has come for me to put the usual question, Mrs. Barclay: Will you wipe while I wash, or will you wash while I wipe?"

"Which was it yesterday?" Kitty asked, shaking the crumbs from her lap; "we're both equally good at both."

"Yesterday, if you recollect, we bribed the nefarious and overpaid mariner, who is now asleep with a quid of tobacco in his cheek—both to wash and wipe. He did neither, though he used up all the fresh water. Mr. Forster had to go without his tea and Dot lost her temper and used most unladylike language." He rose and surveyed the horizon. "The wind is dropping on the flood-tide—that is bad, very bad. It means later on two hours with the sweeps for the tar and me if we are to get any dinner." He sat down in a better position for seeing the whole of Kitty's face. "I must say for an able-bodied man Mr. Forster is singularly useless when it comes to the sweeps."

"You have never yet asked him to row."

"I'm afraid, for my sister's sake. She behaves as if she had an idea his heart was not right, and the worst of a sister is that she always says what she thinks. Now you never do. That is the charming difference between a sister and somebody else's sister."

Kitty put down her parasol. "Would you like to hear what I really think?" she inquired, with her sunniest smile.

"I can guess. Dot is rapidly becoming a minx and a flirt."

"Flirting is a failing in your family."

"I wish it was. It requires a partner and encouragement," Jim retorted cheerfully. "In my case I don't

see where the partner comes in and there certainly is no encouragement. But now, Dot——"

"We are not going to talk about Dot, please, but about you, Mr. Wason." Jim rose and took his seat a little nearer. "Are you aware that you are a very captivating young man?"

"Quite."

"Are you always going to be a very captivating young man?"

"Most probably. It's as good as an over of half-volleys when your eye is in."

Kitty took up one of the tumblers. "Fetch some sea-water, Mr. Wason," she said; "light the spirit-lamp and then bring me the cleanest dish-cloth you can find. Thank you," when Jim had obeyed and sat watching her deftly washing up. "As you have nothing to do," she went on sweetly, "you can tie my shoe-lace; thank you; and now pin back my sleeves for me. Thank you again."

"You have the prettiest wrist I have ever seen," Jim remarked, as he inserted the pins.

"Yes. It has been much admired. I admire it myself as much as anyone."

"And your hair to-day——"

"Is quite incomparable. I'm very proud of my hair and it's all my own. You can pull it if you have any doubt —pull it quite hard, only don't stand on the dish-cloth. A little more water first. Thank you. Will you keep my rings for me? Take them off won't you?" This was an operation that took some time, and both seemed to enjoy it. "Do you ever intend to get married, Mr. Wason? Probably you do. I'm thinking that your wife will find you a very useful lap-dog or lady's maid."

"I say," Jim expostulated calmly.

Kitty, now on her knees and busy amongst the plates and saucers, looked over her shoulder. "You are the best man," she said, smiling, "at handling a dish-cloth I ever met. And it's a rare gift in a young man."

"What's the matter with you to-day? You're not going to lose your temper like Dot, are you? A woman in a temper is worse than the sea in a calm; it gives men such a lot to do."

"I haven't got a temper. But some women like giving men a lot to do."

"Then you're going to preach me a sermon? I'll go on my knees too and then we shall be on equal terms."

Kitty shook her pretty head. "I don't believe in sermons," she said. "Like Mr. Forster I believe only in facts."

"Such as——"

Kitty selected a large stone in the shade. "You shall sit here at my feet," she said coaxingly, "where you can see my face without giving yourself a stiff neck. That's right." She leaned forward slightly. "Now don't interrupt till I have done. My rings first"—their fingers met. "You're beginning to imagine, Mr. Wason, that you are in love with me. Hush! You are not the first young man who has imagined that. You will not be the last. Poor boys! But really I can't help my hair, my figure and my eyes—can I? Secondly, if you imagine that any girl, much less a woman, worth two cents, will fall in love with a young man, simply because he is willing to fetch and carry, to tie her shoe-laces and praise her hair, you are even more foolish than an Oxford undergraduate can be."

The mention of Oxford made Jim knock out his pipe in thoughtful taps.

"May I interrupt to ask what you know about Oxford undergraduates?"

Kitty laughed. "I was a landlady for five years at Oxford. I've seen them drunk and I've seen them sober. Seven"—she counted on her fingers—"seven were quite ready to wait to marry me, though I had a husband living in the house. I was, apparently, in dancing language, to be the first extra."

Jim was looking at the sea. If he was surprised he did not show it.

"Mr. Wason was at Christ Church till this summer, where he took a Pass degree," Kitty went on. "He belongs to the I. Z. and similar smart clubs. He very nearly got his blue in three ways—cricket, rugger and the hurdles. If he had taken a little more trouble he could have been a triple blue. But he didn't. He might have got a First Class in an Honour School, but he preferred to be pushed through a pass by a poor devil of a crammer whom his money enabled him to hire. And now he's prepared to dawdle the best years of his life in attendance on women in drawing-rooms and in country-house cricket; he is very good-looking and he has beautiful eyes and a sweet chin; when he's about thirty he will offer the remnant of a heart that has been broken a dozen times every summer to some fool of a girl whose dresses he has admired and whose heart has been the plaything of a coquette. Why? because no woman worth two cents will be willing to tie herself up for life to a man who from pure flabbiness has chosen to go to pulp." Kitty surveyed the impassive hearer amazed that her remarks made no impression. "Facts, I think, Mr. Wason," she said quietly, "not a sermon. And now I'm going to sleep. You can wake me presently when you have made the tea."

"One minute, please." He was studying every feature in her face. "Is it the truth that you were a landlady at Oxford?"

"Absolutely."

"And your husband is dead?"

Kitty reflected for a fleeting second. "Yes," she said as firmly as she could.

Jim rose and brought two pillows. "I will make the tea in about an hour," he said. "You can sleep quite comfortably here, Mrs."—an imperceptible pause—"Mrs. Barclay." Kitty settled herself dexterously. "Some day," he added with careless courtesy, "I shall also tell

you some facts—facts, not a sermon, but they will keep. There's no hurry. I'm going to have a crack, as they say, with the ancient mariner."

He left Kitty profoundly puzzled. She had expected indignation or gentle chaff. But she was not prepared for the stolid indifference with which Jim apparently had first listened and then sauntered away, not to speak to the sailor of their boat, but to sit on the rocks quietly smoking. She was not able to see, however, that he had pulled a paper from his pocket, the examination of which kept him fully absorbed. But she was much relieved when she saw him return and prepare for tea as if nothing had happened. Indeed, he seemed to be much more interested in watching the other two of their party descend from the heathery hill of which the island practically consisted, than in anything else.

Curiously enough, Jim had provided Dick and Dot also with a topic. Immediately after lunch they had started to re-explore the extent of this rocky domain lying up against Lismore, an island covered with heather and bracken, whose fringe of pebbly beach had suggested it as an ideal spot for a sea-picnic. To Dot this day came as the climax of a magic fortnight—fourteen wonderful days with more happiness compressed into them, it seemed, than in the whole of the rest of her life so far. July, that can be so treacherous on this western coast, had brought one halcyon day to succeed another, refusing to reveal what is equally within her gift; icy rain and drenching grey mists, a pall of inky clouds, a dirty squall-swept sea, and mountains enveloped in the stained robes of the daughters of the storm, whose breath is the blast of the Atlantic gales, and whose drink is the spindrift wrung from the pain of the rebel rocks. But as she sat on the island summit in the heather, with purple Mull and its Sound, peaceful as the lake of a fairy-story, on her right hand; Scarba and a gleaming hint of far-off Jura on the horizon in the south and on her left, above the wooded green shore, Ben

Cruachan, twin-peaked king of mountains, smiling in lonely condescension to his royal brothers in Glencoe, she was content to enjoy the unalloyed pleasure of the moment. Dick, too, at her side was quite willing to forget Kitty's warnings, and to let Fate work its will unhindered. And, as usually happened, from the silence of frank companionship gradually they drifted into confidential conversation, and Dick found himself at last fulfilling his promise to tell her the story of his life—or rather such parts of it as he could tell with ease. Not that there was any part that he ever desired to conceal; his painful and chequered progress from the gutter to wealth was a fact he neither denied nor glossed over. It was Dot herself who unconsciously prevented him from filling in all the details. And Dot listened as she always did in silent admiration, while the glory of a July day, the shifting magic of light and shade on the great hills around them, the play of sun and wind on this purple and green island set in a summer sea, blue as the vault of cloud-flecked sky, filled up the cup of her felicity. A fortnight had passed, and each night the happy beatings of a happy heart whispered that womanhood had come to an unsuspecting girl, and had brought with it a dowry of its own. Was this love? She asked the question shyly of that beating heart, but there was no answer. She only knew that it was good to live; that flowers and ferns, mountains and rocks, sea and land, sunshine and storm, all seemed to chant the same divine message of joy and hope and faith, of a new heaven and a new earth, that in the pleasure of each speeding hour a man's voice and a man's eyes, the touch of his hand or the incommunicable strength of his presence had their constant share. And with her pride and her joy at the discovery of herself went an humble fear. What had she done to merit this rich reward? She, the woman, was only a child after all, ignorant, inexperienced, foolish, helpless, asking for guidance, needing aid, praying for the protection for which the woman as much as the child craved. If this was

love, it was love, the gift—something given, not deserved, calling for gratitude, loyalty, trust. Love, the gift, her heart cried, must give one thing more, that power to believe and trust, without which life and womanhood alike would lose their fulness and their glory.

"I should like to know," Dot was asking after lunch, "what Jim ought to do."

"Well, I suppose he will live in his manor house, serve on the County Council and the Bench, and be in time a useful and very agreeable country gentleman."

Dot straightened out her skirt. "Do you think that is a good enough career for a man?"

"It's the career, I suppose, he has been born and trained for. What do you suggest, Miss Wason?"

"I am ambitious for Jim. He is all I have got," she replied. "I should like him to make himself a big man in politics—something public—that means real work for his country."

"Ah, work! yes, to be sure," Dick answered, lighting his cigar.

She studied him attentively. "Don't you think he has brains and could work?" she asked. "Please say exactly what you think. I want the truth."

"Why should he work?"

"Because it is his duty. Only yesterday you told me that if democracy is not going to be the failure it is in America, our gentlemen, the men of leisure, must buckle to, in order that they may lead. Jim will have plenty of money. I don't want to be the sister of a man who, between hunting, golf and cricket, goes once a week to the Bench and once a month to a County Council that bores him. Jim ought to work as if he hadn't a sixpence."

"The only way to secure that is to put him in that position."

"Then"—she looked him straight in the face—"honestly, you don't believe he can work?"

"Honestly I don't." Forster spoke very quietly. "Your brother doesn't know what work means? How could he? He has received the education of his class—a public school and Oxford—and it has made him a fair cricketer and a charming companion. He will fit into his niche in the county all right—until the democracy decides, as it will, that it can do better without him."

"He has more brains than you give him credit for, Mr. Forster," she said after a pause, but not in the least reproachfully.

"I daresay. But brains are no use until you have learned how to use them. The amateur nowadays is our greatest social peril. The amateur politician for example, in my party and your brother's is the very man who will destroy that party and its cause; one of my objects, I'm afraid, is to fire him out altogether. We want gentlemen to lead, but unless they have learned to take off their coats pretty early they will be worse than useless in the fight with the democracy of the future. The democracy means business; labour means business; we can only beat them both by trained brain and real workers, and one of them is worth fifty country gentlemen."

Dot looked across the sea at Ben Cruachan and from Cruachan to the mountains of Mull asleep in the afternoon sun. "Then Jim is to be a failure," she said slowly. "Is it really too late?"

"It is never too late. But——" he reflectively brushed away the flies.

"Jim must marry," she pronounced after a long pause, in the tone of a matured conviction. "Yes, Jim must marry."

Forster looked over the bracken and the heather down the rocky slope to the sunlit beach. "Marriage," he said, "is often a very dangerous remedy for a young man."

"Not if love has come first, Mr. Forster," she answered, rising. "I think we had better go down to tea."

"One minute. What will love do for your brother that

nothing else can?" But she did not answer. "May I not know? I might be able to help."

She looked at him for a fleeting second and her eyes dropped. "I believe," she said at last, "that if Jim can find the right woman, and he really loves her, he will want to be worthy of her, worthy of the love she is ready to give him. Love will make him then desire to achieve the very best of which he is capable, and it will also give him the power to do it."

"Ah!" Dick reflected on the serene confidence in her eyes. "I wonder if you are right."

She turned to him with a sudden flash. "The work," she said earnestly, "that is necessary for his salvation means that Jim must desire to sacrifice everything that he has valued so far—pleasure, flirting, cricket, golf, shooting. But I am sure that love can perform miracles; if it can't, nothing else can."

"And this love, Miss Wason, that can create ambition and the power to realise it, how is he to find it?"

"He won't find it," she answered. "It will come, if it comes at all, of itself, unasked."

The radiance in her face set him musing. "Love, the gift," he said.

"Yes, love, the gift," she repeated softly.

"But"—why would she not face him?—"but is not love, the gift, also love, the debt?"

"I don't know about that," was her reply. "I don't quite understand what love, the debt, means."

"Supposing it means that love is not a gift at all, but a reward that can only be won because it is deserved—something like ambition, no real good in itself, never to be completely realised, only valuable because the process by which you achieve it is stern, severe, exacting, and makes you a new man by the struggle."

"Ah," said Dot, laughing softly, "that is a man's idea. To the woman love is, first and always love, the gift, not love, the debt. How"—she faced him now—"how could

any woman really deserve the love of the man she really loves? It is her duty to make herself worthy of him and his love."

"And has he no duty to her, to make himself worthy of her love?"

"That he will do by helping her to become the best that the best woman can be. Could any man want more? Could any woman?"

"Your creed," he said, smiling, "is excellently pleasant for the man."

"Ah"—she was smiling too—"not so pleasant as you think. It is only the men who have already made themselves worthy of the woman's gift to whom it is given, and they are not many; and those who know how to keep the gift, I am sure"—she shook the heather from her skirt—"are very few. Perhaps there aren't any——" she broke off to walk to the edge of the cliff. "See, there is Jim waving to us. I will race you to the bottom. But a girl must have ten yards' start."

Even if the handicap had been otherwise she would have won just as easily. Dick's strength was no match for her fawn-like agility, and five minutes before he arrived breathless she was demurely fanning herself on the rocks with a saucer and a large fern.

"Tea, the gift," she said, advancing with a cup to meet him, "unasked for and undeserved."

"Did I not say that the man has the best of it, both in theory and in fact? I like both your theories and your facts, Miss Wason, hugely."

"A woman's theories," interposed Jim, "ought never to be based on facts."

"Why not, pray?" Kitty inquired.

Jim spread out the dish-cloth in his hand. "Oh, because the unnatural combination of theory with fact in a woman always makes her irresistible, and that"—he cocked a comic eye at the Zingari ribbon on his hat—"leads sometimes to very curious results."

CHAPTER XIII

DICK DECIDES

DICK walked into Kitty's sitting-room with a telegram in his hand. "I am afraid," he said in his curtest tones, "that I must go up to London by to-night's mail." Kitty, who was reading by the window, put her book down with a sharp exclamation of dismay. "'Pon my word, my dear," he broke off to remark, "Oban has had the most mysterious effect on you; for ten years I haven't seen you so happy. It's a pity my holiday is over."

Kitty stood thoughtfully smoothing out a crease in her skirt. In the sunlight of the room her face and figure had indeed recovered the virginal grace and untroubled serenity of girlhood. But she eyed her companion now with marked anxiety. "Are you," she asked slowly—"are you going back to Gertrude Wyatt?"

"No," he answered. "It's business. Though"—he sat down—"as usual, there's a woman in it."

"Another woman? Dick!"

"Well, in plain fact, I may be obliged to save Miss Wason from being made a pauper."

Kitty left the window. "You love her?" she demanded breathlessly.

"No."

Her hand fell. "Then," she said almost angrily, "it is high time you left Oban. Oh, I hate you; I hate you."

"Tut, tut! why can't a charming woman discuss a situation without lapsing into rhapsody? This is a matter of business, not of sentiment.

"Business," Kitty cried with great contempt. "Pounds, shillings and pence I suppose you mean. What does it matter if rascals steal Dot's money? What is money to a

girl? But what does matter is, if a great, strong, ambitious rascal steals her heart and then breaks it. That is what you have been doing the last fortnight, Dick Forster. And now——"

"Come, come," he expostulated. "Is it my fault? Be fair, Kitty, be fair."

She made an impatient gesture. "It is not your fault," she said, "no, perhaps it is not your fault. But the fact remains that you have made a girl, whom you do not love, love you, and that is a crime. That is a crime. Dot did not know what love meant before you came. Love—love for you as she believes you to be—is making her as beautiful and innocent a woman as she was a girl. And all that you propose to do in return is to consider whether you can save her from becoming a pauper. What good will her money be to Dot when she learns that the man who has taught her to love him is only a selfish, scheming financier?"

"Am I then to tell her what is not true: to ask for her love on false pretences?"

"Oh, that is just the abominable cruelty of it—the cruelty of men for so many women," Kitty cried in despair. "But mark my words, Dick Forster, you can't undo what you have done here in Oban. Dot will pay for it, poor child, but so, also, will you. And if you don't, I will cease to believe that there is anything good at all in men, or in women, or in this beastly world."

He folded up his telegram. "I can't enter into that now," he said quietly. "It is enough for me at present to decide if Miss Wason is to pay for folly that I can perhaps prevent."

The sincere gravity with which he spoke frightened the colour from her face.

"Dick," she whispered, "what is wrong?"

"Everything. Before long I shall have probably to take a decision which will affect not only Miss Wason, but a good many other people, too."

"Money?"

He seated himself beside her on the sofa. "Money of course," he said. "I will put it as shortly as I can. You remember our friend, Edward Bruce, the real gambler of Monte Carlo." Kitty nodded. "He is the uncle of Jim and Dot Wason. Along with Sir Guy Lemare"—Kitty moved restlessly—"he is their guardian and trustee. Lemare, whom I don't know, is apparently a great traveller, who has such confidence in his co-trustee that he has given him power to act for him unfettered. Now, not long ago, two or three fellows I do know, first-class financial swindlers, rigged up a fine scheme, called to-day The White Lead Syndicate. They wanted me to join with them, but for a good many reasons I declined. But—and this is the point—they did persuade Edward Bruce to take a hand in their gamble."

"And Mr. Bruce is going to lose his money? Serve him right."

"Perhaps," he said drily. "But it isn't only his money. He has put into the venture a good deal of Jim and Dot Wason's."

"And they will lose theirs too?"

"Don't be in a hurry. The White Lead Syndicate is only just beginning. The gamble is spreading on a larger scale than Edward Bruce reckoned on. To save what he first risked, he has been obliged to plunge deeper and deeper. And he has plunged—with Jim and Dot's money."

"Then," she said, after a pause, "if the White Lead Syndicate fails they, too, will lose all they have?"

"My dear," he said, "you are very simple. Of course they will lose. But you forget that if a trustee gambles with his trust funds he may not only find himself and his wards paupers—he may find himself in the dock. If the White Lead Syndicate fails, Mr. Bruce and Sir Guy Lemare may have to go to Portland. Sir Guy is innocent, though that is irrelevant, but Mr. Bruce is not."

Kitty sprang from the sofa and began to walk up and down the room. Presently she stopped in front of Dick. "Will it fail?" she asked in a low voice—"This White Lead Syndicate?"

"Yes, they are bound to fail, sooner or later."

"Then——" She checked herself sharply, one hand on her heart.

Dick quietly drew her on to the sofa again. "The White Lead Syndicate," he said, "is run by a reckless crew and they are at present walking down a very narrow street. There are only two ways out of that street: bankruptcy or—a miracle."

"Miracles," said Kitty, "don't happen in Wall Street or Shorter's Court. Well, Dick, well?"

He paused deliberately while she waited feverishly on his words. "At the commencement of their operations," he proceeded, "the White Lead promoters bumped up against a pretty powerful concern, the London and New York Financial Corporation. How and why that is so wouldn't interest you. But the result will. Fortunately or unfortunately"—he laid an emphatic hand on her shoulder—"though no one either in Wall Street or Shorter's Court knows it, the London and New York Financial Corporation is controlled by the same man who controls Aluminium Amalgamated, the Blue Paradise Mines and a few other concerns."

"Dick!" Kitty had turned almost fiercely. But he said nothing, and the corners of his mouth were drawn tight.

"Ah!" she straightened her shoulders and her fingers drummed on her knees. "Some day then"—the words dribbled out as the thought grew in clearness—"some day then, either the Financial Corporation or the White Lead Syndicate must——" There was a moment's silence. "Mr. Bruce," she added simply, "will have to go into the dock. Poor, poor Dot!"

"You have not got it quite right," he corrected calmly. "It's this way. Sooner or later the syndicate must go to

pieces. The Corporation, in the ordinary course of things, will probably have to help in pulling them down. I can't interfere with the Corporation, and the Corporation can't save the syndicate as things stand. Besides, it's not a charity and philanthropic concern; and it's not in business to give bucketshop gamblers a run. When the crash comes Bruce and Lemare will have to go through the courts for bankruptcy and a flagrant breach of trust."

"But that is just what I said," she interrupted impatiently. "Oh, it's horrible, horrible."

Forster suddenly rose and faced her. "There's a way out," he said; "just the chance of a way out. Supposing I take the field on my own account, simply as a private individual—supposing I, too, go in for a big gamble. Supposing without letting the secret out I try to smash up the White Lead Syndicate quick, in a few weeks—pull 'em down, in fact, before their time. The Corporation won't lose a sixpence, but if I succeded I could make enough out of the fight to pay back Bruce all he has risked—all his trust funds. Lemare and Bruce then will not have to go through the courts, for their trust funds will have come back to them in another form. The only people who will suffer will be the White Lead lot, and that they will probably do in any case." The glow of battle was beginning to fire his face. "Now, Kitty, the question is: am I to take the field, or am I to sit still and let things slide?"

Kitty reflected in silence, fascinated by that cool, strong head, so sharply outlined against the mirror above the fireplace. "If you take the field, Dick, do you run a big risk?" she asked at last.

"Frankly," he replied slowly, "I do. To begin with, I can't tell Bruce, of course, what I am about, and it will be easy to misrepresent my action. And"—he paused—"there are the White Lead people to be reckoned with. You know I have plenty of enemies: men with resources as big as my own, and bigger. If they discovered it was my

game and my interest to smash the White Lead Syndicate they would come to their aid—and they would strip me to my shirt if they could—if "—he smiled—"if they could. But there it is. There is a risk—a big risk."

She played with the brooch on her breast. "And there's no other way of saving Bruce from disgrace and Dot from poverty?"

He passed his hand through his hair. "It's that gambler Bruce who has put us all in this tight corner. The money"—he threw up his chin impatiently—"the money, of course, is bad enough, but Bruce, without Lemare's knowledge, has plunged with trust funds, and that's the devil. It's the disgrace, the shame, the crime one wants to avoid, for the sake of the innocent."

"Yes," she repeated, "for the sake of the innocent—a young man who has never learned to work, and a girl—like Dot." He lit a cigarette while Kitty, with hands clasped on her knees, looked into the future. "These gamblers," she said, with a weary sigh, "these gamblers—and I have seen so many of them."

"Well, which is it to be, my dear? The certainty of financial and moral ruin for Bruce and all his house, or the risk of financial ruin for Richard Forster?"

"Oh, Dick!" She laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder and looked him in the face—"I could never forgive myself if I advised you wrong, never. Your real career is just beginning. If you failed now, you——" the tears stopped her. "Dick, dear, you must decide for yourself."

The afternoon sun sent its passionless shafts of light through her hair as she stood with upturned face, watching the slow clouds in the peerless blue sky dapple the green slopes of Kerrera beyond the quivering calm of the harbour. The cool plash of the July waves on the beach, the gay echoes from a band on a pleasure steamer crossing the bay broke the silence of the room. Neither Kitty nor Dick ever forgot the murmur of that sunlit, western sea, broken by the music of violin and harp as they strove to measure

the issues that an unforeseen destiny had thrust upon them. His past career, the brilliant future that was opening, the risk of ruin,—all these vanished before two inward visions: a young girl in the restaurant at Monte Carlo; a young woman in white silk in the silvery twilight, who had, at his own request, given him one of the roses from her mother's grave, and with the gift a look, just one fleeting but imperishable look from the eyes of a pure woman, to whom love unasked had come. And he—he had taught her to love him. And he did not love her. No, he did not love her.

He put one hand on that beautiful head; with the other he took Kitty's trembling fingers. "Very well," he said very quietly, "I will decide for myself. But whatever the future brings, you and I, Kitty, will always stand together. Promise."

"I have no fear of you, Dick. Please God, you can always trust in me." She knew that he had already decided. Whatever he would do would be right and she could wait with perfect confidence. "Dot," she added lightly, as she took up her book again, "will not be back till dinner-time at eight. But if you want to say good-bye you will find her on the rocks below Battery Point finishing a sketch."

He nodded and left the room. After despatching several telegrams he stood on the pier for fully half an hour, idly watching the steamboats come and go, before he suddenly turned on his heel and walked briskly round the west end of the bay in the direction of Dunollie.

Fortunate indeed are those whose eyes have been rewarded with the vision of one of these July afternoons, flawless in their peace, flawless in the dignity and simplicity of Nature's sorcery. And as Dick followed the road past the wind-bitten sycamores that fringe the point and the noble sweep of the Linnhe of Lorne swam into view, the spiritual beauty of the scene set him on thinking of what he was about to lose by going back to the inhuman strife for supremacy in London. Yonder the white sails of a yacht becalmed off the Shepherd's Hat flashed a message

of sympathy to the red sails of the fishing smack mirrored in the violet shadows that muffled the entrance to Loch Don. From the gleaming bluff of Scarba, breaking the trembling haze in the south to the stern crests of the Glencoe Mountains, the whole land rioted in a witchery of tenderly brilliant colour, washed into wooded knoll, cape, valley and glen with the pure gold of the westering sun, preparing to sink in amethyst and rose to its bed curtained by the purple hills of Mull—and, most wonderful of all, the sea—a matchless sapphire sea set with myriad diamond points of light; a sea that heaved lazily against the shores of Kerrera, green as an emerald, and here at his feet caressed the Maiden's girdle of brown weed. The unearthly stillness that held the whole coast under an enchanter's spell awoke the dreams of the far-off years: dreams that the spirit within, answering unconsciously to the call from without, found materialised for one exquisite moment in the poetry of this western summer world.

Presently Dot heard him scrambling over the rocks and greeted him with the unconscious smile on her lips and the light in her eyes that can be a girl's most intoxicating welcome to a man who understands the meaning of the message.

"There is something wrong?" she asked quickly. "Have you had bad news?"

"Disagreeable, not bad, news. I am obliged to go to London this evening, and I fear my holiday is over."

It struck Dick as curious that she had no conventional phrase at her command, no polite expression of regret. Poor child, how could she? The afternoon light had suddenly been struck out of the heavens, and Mull, that the minute before caressed the green flanks and purple ridges of its mountains in the gold of the westering sun, was now obliterated as though by the anger of wind and rain.

"Business," he was saying, "is always disagreeable. London in August will be intolerable, of course, but I have no choice."

"You mean it is your duty to go," she said in a low voice.

"Yes, I am sure it is my duty to go."

Silence fell upon them both. Dick took one look at her young face as she sat gazing out at the gulls in the water; at Lismore so green and fair under the cool shadow of the Morven hills, at the great white lighthouse blistered by the heat, at the grey Keep of Duart and the Lady's Rock across the gleaming spaces of the summer sea. That one look was enough to fill any man with pity and remorse.

"Are you not going to finish your sketch?" he asked at last.

"It is a failure already," she replied, with a weary smile. "I must begin it all over again to-morrow. The lights will perhaps be easier then."

She had recovered herself and was packing up her things with a forced calm. "I am afraid," she said, with averted eyes, "that I was very rude just now." She paused. "Jim will miss you very much. You have been so kind to him, and I was hoping that I might talk again to you about his—his future."

"I should like to think," he said deliberately, "that Jim was not the only person who would be sorry I am leaving Oban."

She turned with a brave effort at frankness. "We shall all miss you, Mr. Forster," she answered, and her eyes rested on the lavender and opal lights stealing over the mountains in the Linnhe of Lorne. "I as much, perhaps more than anyone else. You have taught me more than I can say in the last fortnight."

"Taught?" he repeated, with genuine surprise.

"Surely yes. You always seem to forget that I am only a girl—very young, very inexperienced, very ignorant. And a girl has so much to learn and so few who know how to teach her. I like to think that I can never again be the foolish child I was a fortnight ago."

"I suppose not," he replied, and his tone made the remark a tribute almost of awe. "But you will not misunderstand me," he added, "when I say that one at least of the party would prefer you should never lose the pre-

rogative and privilege of girlhood." She was looking at him with shy curiosity. "Don't be in a hurry, Miss Wason," he added, "to learn what the experience of the world forces on all of us."

"I am not afraid of the experience of the world," she answered quietly. "A fortnight ago I was, but not now—no, not now."

"And why not now?"

The faintest pink crept into her cheeks. Her eyes dropped. "I cannot say," she almost whispered. "I only know that it is so."

"Some of us," he said, smiling, "are not afraid, because we believe in ourselves, some because we believe in others. To which class do you belong, Miss Wason?"

"Women ought not to belong to either. They ought to believe in themselves because they believe in others."

"I prefer to think that they ought to believe in others because they first believe in themselves."

"No, no." Her smile only half-concealed her earnestness. "A woman can never really believe in herself until she has learned to believe in someone else." She stopped, and again that treacherous pink flooded into her cheeks as if she had been betrayed into uttering a thought whose value and truth lay in its remaining a prized secret.

"You spoke of teaching," Dick remarked, after a pause that neither was aware of. "You, too, have been a teacher. You, too, have taught me a good deal in this fortnight, Miss Wason."

"But"—she turned to him, looking up into his eyes—"what could a girl teach you, Mr. Forster, that you did not know before, or was worth your knowing."

"The man," he answered quietly, "to whom a girl can teach nothing is a man not worth that girl's knowing."

"And you really mean"—the happy radiance on her face was as inspiring as the magic lights on yonder hills—"you really mean that I have taught you something? That makes me feel very, very proud."

"I do."

"Will you not tell me what it is before you go?" The question had been shyly asked before she could check herself.

He looked at his watch and then at her. "It will take a little time," he said. "Will you walk back with me and I will tell you? and"—he let his hand rest for a moment on hers as he took the paint-box from her—"perhaps you can complete the lesson before the train goes."

For a moment she wavered. The sun once again rode triumphant in God's blue heaven. Lismore was once more fair and green as the gardens of Dreamland, and the happy, happy tide rippled in from the South of Mull across the golden waters of an enchanted sea.

"It is too beautiful," she whispered, "too beautiful to leave just yet. Can you not spare me a few minutes to tell me here on these rocks where you have already taught me so much?"

As the clock struck eight Dot had not yet returned, and Kitty, dressed for dinner, watched from the window in her sitting-room the glow of purple and rose on the peaks of Mull. Suddenly there was a light step on the stair, the door was flung open, and she found herself with a girl's soft arms round her neck, and a beating heart against her breast asking for a woman to share in a woman's joy.

"My dear child," she exclaimed, "is this an apology or——?" Dick was standing in the doorway.

"No, it only means," he remarked quietly, "that I am to get no dinner before I catch the night mail."

"Dot!" Kitty began indignantly, and then she swept her aside and seized his hand. "Dick!" she cried, forgetting herself, and Dot was too happy to notice the slip of the tongue—"Dick!"

"Yes, Mrs. Barclay. I have only time to say that Dot has kindly consented to give me the right when I am in London not only to protect my own interests but hers too, now and for the rest of our lives."

CHAPTER XIV

NEWS FROM BUENOS AYRES AND ELSEWHERE

"WELL, you won the election after all." Gertrude Wyatt in this pleasant garden by the river crossed the crowded lawn and smiled her congratulations to the politician in a grey frockcoat.

"We did. It was a narrow squeak. If we had only had a better candidate the majority would have been three times as big." He placed a chair for her in the shade of the arbour, and Gertrude kindly shifted her parasol so that her hat as well as her muslin dress might be admired without undue effort. "But the man of course who won it for us was Forster. You know him, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, quite well, and"—she took the iced coffee from him—"I believe in him, which is not always the case with one's friends."

"We all believe in him," the politician replied with unusual enthusiasm, "because we must. He's the biggest find for the party of the last ten years, or twenty for that matter."

Gertrude sipped at her glass. "I suppose," she said, "he is certain to win his own election next, and then he can begin to be a big find on his own account."

"He'll win hands down, and he's the only man who can. Five years from now," he added, "he'll pick the place he wants in the Cabinet, and we'll be happy to give it him."

"Quite so." She laughed gently. "I am glad you recognise already that Mr. Forster dictates, but does not accept, terms. He will certainly take the place he wants and no other. Oh, it will be an excellent tonic for you all."

"The party wants a tonic," the politician answered gaily.

"Mr. Forster's tonics," Gertrude replied, "contain a very unconventional amount of strychnine. They either kill or cure."

Her companion leaned over her as he took her empty glass. "You talk," he said, "as if you knew the taste of —the strychnine."

"Mr. Forster," she said, "is kind enough to supply his tonics on reduced terms to a good many women as well as to the select men. "Is it"—her eyes met his with a calm challenge—"is it, do you think in my case, kill—or cure?"

"That depends more on the will of the patient than the object of the doctor," he answered, trying to make her look again directly at him. "The treatment, I am ready to affirm, so far has been more than successful, judged by the external results."

"Which, of course, so far as women are concerned, are the only results politicians care about. "That"—she buttoned up her glove slowly—"that is why Mr. Forster is not a politician, and why women don't believe in politicians."

"Not even if the politicians gave you a vote of interest in their affairs."

"Women," Gertrude retorted, "don't want a vote in order to interfere. They want it in order to be more, not less dependent on men. Some day that truth will dawn on the politicians, and then, but not till then, we"—her eyes dropped—"shall be their slaves."

"The chains," he said gently, "are quite ready, and one politician at least awaits the day when he will have a chance of fitting them on. Till then he is the slave."

"I will not forget. And now tell me some more about the election."

He too moved his chair into the shade. "Forster," he said, "only did two things. He took the organisation in hand and he spoke. When he came down there was no organisation, but he created one as a conjurer does a rabbit out of a silk hat. I don't believe for three nights that financier took his clothes off, and for two he certainly

never slept at all." He paused to reflect on the memory. "Did you ever hear him speak?"

"Yes, more than once. He has what the journalists call the magnetic gift."

"Magnetic? Gad, it's not oratory, it's witchcraft. It's not easy to sweep five thousand provincials off their feet on a baking July afternoon—but he did it. And when the election was over there wasn't a young woman in the constituency who wouldn't have followed him barefoot to Land's End had his little finger suggested it."

"Young women," Gertrude remarked pleasantly, "are very apt to misinterpret Mr. Forster's little finger." She let her eyes wander over the gay groups in the garden. "Isn't it rather dangerous," she inquired, after some reflection, "for a financier to take to politics so seriously?"

"Dangerous? for the financier or the politics?"

Gertrude nodded to a friend and then turned with masterly indifference. "I should always be afraid, if I were a politician," she answered composedly, "that my financier might—well, might come down with a crash. Financiers nowadays make their fortunes in such various and curious ways."

"Oh, Forster's sound enough," he answered; "we've satisfied ourselves on that point."

She laughed gently. "When you give women votes," she replied, "you will find that they will be more concerned with moral than with financial soundness."

"Do you suggest——" he began almost indignantly.

"Ah," said Gertrude, smiling, "I haven't a vote. The point doesn't therefore interest me—yet."

She glided away to chat for a few minutes with several other men, while she sent a faithful henchman to discover where her mother was, and then promptly took her back to London. She was remarkably silent in the train, and her mother's ceaseless flow of gossip and criticism was permitted to pursue its course uninterrupted. And when they had reached their flat she went straight up to her room,

unlocked her desk and took out a long foreign telegram which she read with the air of one to whom the contents were perfectly familiar. The telegram was from Buenos Ayres, and the sender was Sir Guy Lemare. She was in the act of replacing it in the drawer when an impetuous tap at the door brought her mother with a swirl of silken skirts into the room.

"Gertrude," she cried with suppressed excitement, "Mr. Forster is engaged."

Her daughter locked the desk. "To be married?" she asked, without turning round.

"Yes, to be married, of course. I've just had a letter from Mrs. Ottoway—see, read it for yourself."

"And who is it, mamma?" she asked quietly.

"As the letter is from Mrs. Ottoway, who could it be but Dot—Dot Wason? Isn't it extraordinary? Fancy his wanting to marry that baby."

"Perhaps," was the measured reply, "it is more extraordinary that baby wanting to marry Mr. Forster."

Mrs. Wason looked at her perplexed. "Then you are not disappointed?" she asked with real annoyance.

"Pray, mamma"—Gertrude was smiling, and as usual the smile was an impenetrable mask—"why should I be disappointed?"

"My dear," Mrs. Wyatt answered almost indignantly, "I am not likely to forget what you said at Monte Carlo. I must say you take this—this amazing news in a cold-blooded way that positively frightens me."

"Monte Carlo," Gertrude replied, "was two years and more ago. A good deal has happened since then. Besides,"—she laughed softly—"Mr. Forster and you, mamma, have never given me the right to be disappointed."

Her mother was more perplexed than ever. But a glance at her daughter's face and the wisdom of a long experience told her that it was useless at this moment to expect either information or candour from this self-possessed and mysterious young woman. Gertrude meanwhile

had moved across the room to the wardrobe and selected a blouse and a skirt with some care.

"Are you going out?" her mother demanded, leaning against the bed-rail.

"I am not so disappointed," she said, as with calculated coolness she fastened the waistband, "that I need deprive myself of my usual exercise."

Her mother walked reluctantly towards the door. "We shall have to give them a present," she said, dropping into her usual plaintive note. "Do think of something appropriate, Gertrude, for a middle-aged man and a baby."

"Won't it be time enough, mamma," she said, "to think of the present when we know that the marriage is really going to take place, and that we are asked to it? Congratulations appropriate to a middle-aged man and a baby are all we need worry about now, so, if you are writing to Mrs. Ottoway, be sure to give Dot my best love and every good wish—for the future that awaits her."

A few minutes later Mrs. Wason, inditing an enthusiastically insincere letter, with the unimportant words underlined, as was her wont, heard the front door closed with the noiseless care of a controlled will. She put down her pen, wondering what Gertrude really thought of this unexpected news, and no little troubled by the forced calm with which her daughter had received it: for that it was forced she was absolutely convinced, and she was right.

Gertrude indeed had required all her self-mastery to prevent a betrayal of her astonishment and dismay, and as she walked slowly through the deserted August streets of Mayfair towards the Park, she was endeavouring to analyse the pent-up emotion within. It was idle to deceive herself. The news was a cruel and humiliating blow. Six months ago it would have made her angry. But to-day anger was obliterated by passion. She had not merely lost a man with a great future, she had lost the man she loved—the man whom she had failed to inspire with love

for herself, but whose life had grown to be indispensable to her own. Henceforward Richard Forster would belong in all that he dreamed, all that he did, all that he aspired to be, to another woman. Another woman's devotion would be the power that would create and nourish his ambition; in another woman's love he would find his motive and his reward. And what she with all her beauty, all her physical and mental gifts, had failed to do after two years of familiar friendship, had been accomplished in a few short weeks by a child who had just left the schoolroom. Yes, it was bitter, inexpressibly bitter. Gertrude had worked to make this man. She had divined correctly what he was and what he might become. She had divined how to encourage him, to train him, to educate him for the part he could be made to play: she had suggested the line of development, had directed his progress, found him friends. Secretly, by a word here, a hint there, by skilful intrigues and concerted manœuvres opened up the road and smoothed his path. From the first she had lavishly given him of her very best; for his sake she had sacrificed more than one tempting opportunity, and her reward had been a success far greater than she had expected. By her advice he had finally taken up politics, and now a brilliant political career awaited him. His party welcomed him with open arms. In a few years he would, by his wealth and his inexhaustible strength, be the leader who was needed, a man worthy of all the sacrifices that can be a pleasure and a pride to a woman who loves. And now—now Dorothy Wason, this unformed child, would garner the harvest sowed by ambition and fostered by love—Dorothy Wason to whom he owed nothing, who had done nothing. And—cruellest thought—Dorothy Wason would also love and be loved by him.

Gertrude had gambled for a great prize: she had pledged her all to win; victory had grown to be absolutely necessary. But she had lost. She had lost. Defeat was humiliating enough; but in this hour of humbling pain, de-

feat spelt not merely failure but the ruin of her own future. Her ambitions had suddenly shrivelled up; the motives for their existence, their object and value in her life had been extinguished. What use was her beauty now? for what end could she strive if the prize that made striving sweet, sustaining and precious; if the love that made womanhood a matchless and justifiable source of pride was not dead, but simply taken from her? She had despised love; she had scorned the weakness that enslaved so many other women, and to-day she was as weak, as helpless as the most foolish woman in England. The cruel verdict of Fate was pronounced unfalteringly by her heart. Life without Richard Forster would be a life without either value, pleasure, or meaning: a mockery of pain and hollow shams.

She sat down on one of the deserted chairs in the airless and deserted Park, conscious only of a terrible hate—hatred sharpened by desire for vengeance on the girl through whom she had learned that life without love must prove for a woman more cruel than sentence of death; the girl who had stepped in to rob her of the love that was her right. Against Dick she felt no anger. He was not the criminal. The criminal was of her own sex. The criminal was Dot. It was Dot who must be punished. It was Dot whom she would punish. And the means were ready to her hand. How could they be best employed so as to effect her purpose?

Gertrude reviewed the situation fired by a new hope. Was this really the end? No, surely not. She had not yet lost Dick. He could be won back. And the first step was to prevent his marriage taking place. But it was necessary that the rupture should come from Dot, and Dot alone. Dick must be taught through Dot's actions two indispensable lessons: first, that he had made a serious mistake in asking this child to be his wife; secondly, that there was only one other woman in the world who could repair the mistake. In short, he must be brought into

absolute dependence on herself. The telegram from Buenos Ayres in her pocket had completed the information she was convinced which put Dick's social future in her power. Sir Guy Lemare was Dot's guardian. Sir Guy Lemare would act as she chose. A tempting plan suddenly flashed before her, and she rose with relentless decision to set the new-born scheme in operation.

A man took off his hat and addressed her. She turned impatiently. "Good-evening, Mr. Steer," she said, covering her surprise with her sweetest smile.

"I want to talk to you," he answered. "I was on my way to your house, but by good luck I have found you here. Will you not give me half an hour?"

Gertrude yawned slightly, for she was thinking now with concentrated rapidity. Steer's unexpected appearance had suggested a new and exciting development of the plan that was shaping itself so effectively.

"Oh, certainly, if you like," she said. "I would particularly enjoy a chat, as it happens. You understand so perfectly how to talk to women without making love to them."

Steer was still indulging in his hoarse laugh of satisfaction as she led the way to two chairs under a tree where they would not be observed by every passer-by. He had not been going to the flat, for he never told the truth to women, but he was none the less delighted at the prospect of enjoying an hour in company stimulating equally to the senses and the brain. And Gertrude this evening was looking extraordinarily well. The spring in her step, the colour in her cheeks, the subdued fire in her eyes, were provocative and soothing.

"You were coming to tell me," she said, with her confiding smile, "that you have decided to have nothing to do with the White Lead Syndicate."

Steer's surprise was obvious. "How did you know that?" he demanded abruptly.

Gertrude shook her head playfully. "What is your

reason?" she asked gently, and Steer studied her face. "You can trust me," she added.

He continued to study her. "What is your proof?" he questioned slowly.

"Simply that I am your friend."

He leaned forward, moistening his lips. "You are also the friend," he said, "of the man I hate most—Richard Forster."

"Richard Forster," she repeated reflectively. "I have learned a great deal about Richard Forster from you, Mr. Steer, but that is quite the most interesting thing about him you have ever told me. Pray, what has he to do with the White Lead Syndicate?"

"Nothing." Gertrude was smiling, and it nettled him. "I wish to God he had."

She leaned back nonchalantly. The ideas were coming fast and it was necessary to be very cool. "And if Richard Forster had?" she remarked, playing with the tassel on her parasol and affecting to avoid his ardent glances. She was fully aware that she could fool this coarse sensualist to the top of her bent.

Steer laid a fat hand on her knee. "I came to this country," he said, "on my own account as well as on behalf of three friends of mine. We only want one thing—revenge. Ten years ago Richard Forster skinned us all four. I don't go back till I have taken his skin, and if I have to wait till Doomsday I'll wait." He chuckled with savage confidence. "We have the powder and shot, but we are not going to waste it on the White Lead Syndicate. I am making them keep it dry for bigger game—for Dick Forster. See?"

"Quite."

He rubbed his fleshy, greedy hands, that the skin of the enemy alone would satisfy.

"There is someone trying to break up the syndicate," Gertrude said, after a pause.

"Oh, yes." He was not interested.

"If," she continued deliberately—"if you joined the syndicate, do you think with your powder and shot you could bring that man down?"

"To a certainty we could."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure."

Gertrude drew a deep breath. A decision had to be taken and she hesitated. The issues were so vast and so uncertain and the idea had only formulated itself half an hour ago.

Steer had put a hand on her arm. "You want," he said, "to have that man broken up? If I do it, what is to be my reward?" But Gertrude said nothing. She was wrestling with the new and bewildering idea. "Make it worth my while," he pleaded hoarsely, "and, by God, for love of you, I'll break him—break him to his last dollar."

"You can't," she answered with a touch of scorn, intended to lash him into fury. "He would break you."

"You don't understand," he replied, his tired eyes lighting up. "My three friends are big enough to break any man. Give me the word—the word I want—and I'll persuade them to make a job of it—but I shall expect some reward—the rew——"

"It is not necessary," she interrupted. "The man who is trying to break up the White Lead Syndicate is"—she paused—"Richard Forster."

Steer's stick fell to the ground with a clatter. An oath dropped from his cracked lips. "Is that so?" he demanded, seizing her arm. "Will you swear that is so?"

"On my honour it is so, Mr. Steer," she replied, and he could see she was telling the truth.

"Very well," he buttoned up his coat rapidly. "It's a secret, of course, and I don't ask how you learned it. But you won't lose by confiding in me, Gertrude Wyatt. You shall come in with us and have your share of the pickings and they'll set you up for life. Oh, yes," his

laughter bubbled up. "You'll be a woman as rich as you are beautiful, by God!"

She was eyeing him closely. "You are going through with it now?" she questioned.

"Of course," he snapped out. "What do you think! I've waited years for such a chance as this, and it has come at last—at last." He struck with his stick on the ground with bloodthirsty exultation. "Oh, we shall strip him to the skin, and then," he chuckled, "we'll take that off—all of it. But all is fair in war, and," he added with his most gallant leer, "and in love."

"Yes, Mr. Steer, all is fair in war and in—love."

He hurried away, anxious not to lose a moment in turning this precious information to account, while Gertrude with hands folded in her lap reflected on the momentous step she had taken. She had yielded to the influence of an irresistible impulse—the desire to see the man she loved reduced to poverty and impotence, to complete dependence on the woman whose ambition it was to remake his future as her work and her work alone. When Dick's engagement had been broken off, when, thanks to Steer and to Steer's friends, he was once more a pauper, she would teach him how her love and her wealth could provide him with a new career and a new and more satisfying life, and how through her love alone could he become what she dreamed he should be—her partner in a common happiness and a common triumph. Love as the architect of life—that was a conception noble and inspiring. And it was for the sake of the man she loved that she had stooped to traffic and to betray.

Of the real issues she was ignorant; of what lay behind the White Lead Syndicate she knew practically nothing. Of the tangled interests in that vast network that had been knitted together by the fingers of Fate she had no thought. Fortune had robbed her of her reward; Fortune had also put into her hands the means to recover what she had lost. Other women might have felt scruples;

she felt none, and it was a woman's love that made the difference. It would be a woman's love that would justify in the end. She no longer desired revenge even on Dot. To punish her was both stupid and unnecessary. All that was essential now was to prevent her from interfering, and Gertrude had already arranged in her mind how that could be brought about with certainty and ease.

She called a hansom, and before long had despatched a detailed telegram to Buenos Ayres. As she came out of the Cable Company's office a man entering in great haste jostled against her.

"Good-evening, Mr. Forster," she began, with her soothing smile. "I thought you were in Scotland."

Dick had pulled out his watch. "Excuse me," he said, "but I have a train to catch and I must first send off a cable."

"I don't propose to detain you. My congratulations will keep."

Dick suddenly paused. "No," he answered in his coolest voice, "let me have them now. The cable can wait."

"Well"—she studied him quietly—"Dot is a friend of mine and we all think her a very lucky girl."

"And what am I?" he demanded.

Gertrude stepped into her hansom. "Oh, you!" she said, with a little laugh, "we haven't thought about you at all—yet."

He closed the doors. "Tell me your real opinion," he asked earnestly.

"My real opinion?" He nodded. "Ask me," she said, with a suggestion of coquetry, "in three months from to-day and I will tell you."

"But in three months I shall be married."

"Precisely. My real opinion will be worth something then. It is worth nothing now." Another smile, and the hansom carried her away into the maze of the traffic.

CHAPTER XV

JIM TAKES OFF HIS COAT

THE September sun shone with blithe irony into the inner room of this office in the city. Outside, the roar of the traffic, the ceaseless stir of thousands of human beings coming and going along the crowded streets; within, the intermittent ring of the telephone bells and the whistle of the call-tubes, the swinging swish of the lift, the tireless click-click of the typewriters, the perpetual patter of feet on the bare stairs and the banging of doors filled the air with the bewilderment of Babel, but Dick Forster, in his shirt-sleeves at his table, worked as if around him lay the silence of the summer seas that lap the shores of Lismore.

"Well?" His confidential secretary had entered noiselessly.

"Bruce," the man said, "has taken five thousand more shares. They are up three-eighths and there are no sellers."

Dick made a calculation on paper. "H'm," he muttered. "Five thousand more shares and half only paid up. They've dowsed the fool right up to the neck." He shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette. "Anything from New York?" The secretary opened the door and said something in a low voice to the outer room. A thin slip of paper was handed him by unseen fingers.

"They are ready to put the screw on, sir," he said, "when you give the word."

Forster let his eye run over the cablegram. "Tell them," he said, "to lie low—as low as they can. I don't want the bottom out of the cask until"—he flicked some dust from one of the grimy panes—"until I am married. We must hold the market up till then."

The secretary nodded and went to the speaking-tube, while Dick meditatively chewed the end of his cigarette.

"It's as clear as noonday," he remarked presently. "The White Lead crew have roped in somebody else—several somebody elses perhaps—and it's given them a new lease of life. I wonder who the new man is."

The secretary looked up from his file of papers. "Are you sure, sir," he said, "that there is a new man behind them?"

Dick threw his cigarette into the waste-paper basket and selected a fresh one. "It's a new man in the syndicate," he answered, "but an old and tried hand at the game." He rubbed his chin as he walked over to the table. "I wonder," he said, with an emphatic smile, "I wonder if the secret has leaked out."

The secretary put down his stylograph. "The secret, sir?" he questioned.

"That secret that it was Richard Forster who chipped seriously into the gamble ten weeks and more ago."

"I hope, sir," the secretary rejoined in an injured tone, "that you don't mean that the secret has been let out in this office."

His master patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. "No, no," he said, "I meant nothing of the kind. You and I alone know the truth, and you can keep secrets better than I can. The traitor, if there is a traitor, must be a woman."

"A woman?"

"Well," said Dick, "it obviously isn't a man. That's all I meant. But you are not very quick at taking a joke."

The secretary had recourse to his papers. Of course, if Mr. Forster chose to confide his business secrets to a girl, it was only another proof of the extraordinary levity and speed with which this engagement had been brought about.

Dick meanwhile had struck a match and then blown it out slowly without lighting his cigarette. "Not that it

matters much," he was saying thoughtfully—"it will have to come out before long—but I should be annoyed if it is known before I am married, that's all. And," he added, pressing his lips together, "the new man, whoever he is, is going to have a run for his money, and mine too. However, perhaps he will do my job nicely for me; if he will bolster them up for the six weeks I want, I shan't complain, and then"—he whistled softly—"there will be rockets going up and a good many sticks coming down." He drew his chair up to his desk and turned over some papers. "What about those settlements?" he asked presently.

"They telephoned from Lincoln's Inn, sir, this morning, that they would not be ready till next week. Mr. Bruce has been making some difficulties."

Dick laughed grimly. "Poor devil!" he muttered. "When he went into the White Lead Syndicate he forgot that his niece might wish to get married and that respectable solicitors will not accept White Lead Syndicate as a gilt-edged investment. You can telephone back that there is no hurry, but that I am willing to sign whenever the papers are ready."

The clerk left the room and his master stretched himself in his chair. "He will have to tell Dot," he said aloud. "Yes, he will have to tell Dot. Poor child!—poor child! I could wring the old gambler's neck."

The secretary had returned with a document tied with red tape. "Your will, sir," he said. "Quite correct."

Dick took it and read it carefully through. "Good," was his brief comment. "If Bruce can't make a settlement, I can at least make my will. And," he was smiling with genuine pleasure, "if I am run over, Dot will be all right. Bring in two of the clerks and we'll finish this up."

The will was duly signed and witnessed, and Dick smoked a cigarette with considerable satisfaction. He was engaged in dictating a letter to his female stenographer

when the confidential secretary again stole into the room and laid a cablegram on the table, which Dick opened and read with an unmoved face. "Come back," he said to the girl, "in fifteen minutes."

When they were alone he held out the cablegram. "What do you make of that?" he demanded.

"I should have the passenger lists searched, sir," the secretary said at once.

"Of course. You have the dates. Get me a complete register of all the boats coming and going and wire out further instructions."

He folded up the cablegram, put it into his breast pocket and paced up and down the room in absorbed thought. Then he rang his call-bell.

"Telephone to Mrs. Barclay," was what he now said, "that I must see her at four o'clock this afternoon. If she is out, have a messenger sent after her to wait for the answer without fail."

The set of Dick's mouth and jaw indicated that he was seriously annoyed. His fingers drummed on the table, and he pushed away the blotting-pad at the edge of the desk impatiently.

"Miss Wason, sir," announced the confidential secretary. "Will you see her?"

"Miss——" he sprang up, "of course. Show her in at once."

A girl's laugh filtered from one of the outer rooms through the half-opened door, the rustle of a woman's skirt, and Dot was standing in the great financier's jealously-guarded sanctum.

"Do many women come to see you in your shirt-sleeves?" she asked.

"Dozens," he answered, with perfect gravity, "but not on business, of course. I only like them when they come on business, but then I'm peculiar."

She shook her fist at him and broke away to prowl round the room, asking questions all the time, peering into the

pigeon-holes, lifting the papers, and playing with the call-tubes.

"This," she said, "is an awful place. If I had to work here I should go mad in ten minutes, raving mad. No one seems to care who you are; everyone is rushing somewhere else as if they didn't know where they are going and are quite certain that they will never get there."

"Most of them don't, and the few who do, discover that they have made a great mistake."

"But what are you all doing?"

"One half of us spends its time in trying to steal the other half's money; that other half is trying to prevent it from being stolen."

"And which are you doing, Dick?"

"Sometimes one and sometimes the other. Lately I have mainly been stealing. You see, I am going to get married."

"Are you stealing for me?"

"You have given me a right to, have you not?"

Dot swung herself on to the American desk and pitched her hat into the waste-paper basket. "Come here, Dick," she said, "come and sit down beside me, just there." But he paused to inspect her before he obeyed, thinking with some justice that never had a financier's office seen anything so charming and inspiring as this slim girl in her white muslin, swinging her brown shoes in the September sunlight. "You will promise," she pleaded, laying a hand on his hair, "you will promise me never to do anything for me that is wrong. I would rather be a maid-of-all-work than that you should make one single penny that was not honestly earned."

He took her hand to his lips. "My dear," he replied, "you ask a great deal of a business man, but I promise you that every penny I may ask you to take from me shall be earned in the cause of right."

"No," she said suddenly, "you shall not promise. I

ought not to have asked. I can and I do trust you, now and always."

He pressed her hand. "Trust me, dear one, as you would trust yourself."

The answer came from a woman's eyes and it was more eloquent than speech. Little did Dot guess, as she sat in her happiness and pride, of the strange spurs that love and hate, ambition and greed, the unquenchable thirst for power and wealth and fame can create for the spirit of man. The city, indeed, had filled her for the first time with a nameless doubt, the dim idea of a future unknown and unknowable, a consciousness of ignorance, a sense of helplessness, disquieting in its mysterious strength. For the first time, she had shivered under the cold grip of a hostile world in which she was only one insignificant atom, had recognised that in this new life that was to be hers an invisible and omnipotent Fate would decide, and that in the decison she would have neither voice nor share. There was no fear in this new feeling. Love had done many wonderful things for her in the last few weeks; not the least wonderful had been the gradual revelation of the duties and privileges that the woman who would shortly be a wife owed to herself, the dawn of a desire to grapple with trials and sorrow, the acquisition of a bracing confidence to meet the burden of responsibility. A girl's joy and a girl's happiness had never bubbled up so fresh and pure from day to day as in these brief but flawless hours of courtship since Dick had spoken by the rocks that saw the rose and amber of the setting sun flush the pearl-grey sea; but with the joy there had slowly blossomed a deepening and fuller consciousness of the meaning, beauty and value of what womanhood would inevitably claim from her if happiness was to be truly linked with the accomplishment of duty. How best to respond to the demand from within, how most truly to combine the girl's joy of existence with the new dreams and aspirations sacred to the woman—was not that a tremendous task? Love and love

alone, she had hitherto believed, would triumphantly solve all the searchings of her heart, all the perplexing problems that so strangely had begun to press upon her; but not till this morning had she been sharply arrested by the chill finger of doubt, suggesting that even now, still more certainly in the future, to many difficulties love perhaps could give no answer, and that she must either seek elsewhere or acquiesce in the silence of defeat. Elsewhere? For a woman, what other guide than her heart, than love, was there?

"Tell me, what is a syndicate, Dick?" she demanded suddenly.

"Why should you bother about syndicates?" he replied.

"Because I want to share in everything—everything that interests you. I try to tell you all my most secret thoughts, all that is here," she placed his hand on her breast, "and in return I want to know all—all that lies there in that heart of yours, that is now my heart, too."

He took the pleading hand. "Little witch," he said gently, "your curiosity shall be satisfied. Business is like the game of musical chairs, and a syndicate is a scheme of the worst players to ensure that all but those in the syndicate have their chairs snatched from them."

"So that they fall and hurt themselves? I see. Were you ever in a syndicate?"

"I am trying to smash one now," he added, smiling.

"Why?"

"Because they are bent on robbing some of my friends."

Dot slipped off the table and went up to his side. "You must succeed," she said earnestly.

He looked down into her glowing eyes. "Yes, I shall succeed, unless," he patted her cheek, "the women interfere."

"Oh, what have we to do with it?"

"My dear, when women interfere with business it is always from the best motives, but generally with the most

disastrous results; remember that. And now I will tell you a true story."

She listened eagerly while he narrated with vivid detail the history of Aluminium Amalgamated, and when he had finished she played with his watch-chain in silence.

"You frighten me," she murmured—"you do, and have done, such wonderful things. Last night Uncle Edward had a great politician to dinner, and he and I walked round the lake, under the stars, and talked about you. If I were to repeat all that he said about you and what he and his friends expect from you in the future—oh, my dear, my dear, I am so proud when they talk like that. I can't sleep because I am so happy. But," she laid her head on his shoulder, "when I remember the millions of women there are in the world, it seems to me the strangest mystery that you—you whom every woman would be glad to love—should have chosen just me?"

"Is it not equally strange, Dot, that you should have chosen me?"

"But I didn't," she protested. "You taught me to love you before I knew what had happened. Listen," she whispered—

"'If you were I, and I were you,
How could I love you, say?
How could the rose-leaf love the rue,
The day love nightfall and her dew,
Though night may love the day?'

"Oh, Dick, Dick, continue to teach me to love you, so that I may every day grow to be more worthy of you, that I may be fit to be the wife of a man who will be great. I don't want you to be great, unless I can share the greatness with you."

He took her in his arms. "Dear child," he said, in his deepest tones, and a fine pity softened his eyes, "when an ambitious, self-made man of business asks a girl to

share his life, he does a bold and a selfish thing. No man who has struggled up from the gutter as I have can ever hope to pay back to a God-fearing, innocent girl the gifts she has it in her power to bestow. Believe me it is so. The best that you can do for me and for yourself is to remain the girl you were before," he laughed softly, "you were pleased to choose me. The world, thank God! has spared you so far. I want it to spare you to the end, because it is the girl Dot who will make me great, if anyone can."

"I don't want to be spared, Dick," she replied slowly. "If I am to lighten your burden, I must be taught first what the burden is and why it is there. If love is worth anything at all, it can make the woman Dot better than the girl. But you must promise to trust me—you will?"

A discreet tap at the door. "Mr. Wason," said the secretary, "has been waiting to see you, sir."

"Good gracious!" Dot cried. "I had forgotten Jim and my business."

"It's all right." Jim had appeared in the doorway. "I have been enjoying myself too—learning how to use a typewriter and all that, you know. The third girl at the long table in room Number One, is——"

His sister put her hand on his mouth. "Jim, I shall really be angry," she said, "if you don't hold your stupid tongue."

"Well, you needn't be so stuffy. It was the secretary who suggested I should make myself useful until you had finished wasting the time of the boss. By the way, too, there are all sorts of people kicking their heels out there, from millionaires and bootblacks to the unemployable like me. It's about time——"

Dot closed the door in his face. "Dick," she whispered, "Jim has a favour to ask. Grant it for my sake, please. You will?" He nodded. "And now my hat, you haven't a mirror, of course?—then put it on for me, and be sure it's straight. You silly boy! I didn't ask

you to upset it as soon as it is on, and my best hat too!—Now don't look fierce and millionairish or I won't give you this." She took the rose from her breast, kissed it, and placed it in his coat. "You don't deserve it one bit. If you ever in this dreadful place think of me, listen to its message and it will tell you all the secrets that a girl has been pining to betray but was too shy. Jim," she flung up her chin, "Jim is quite right. There are too many girls in this office and they're all in love with you of course, because girls are fools, particularly——" She had blown him the sauciest adieu and the pretence of a curtsey, and with her the sunlight vanished from the room.

"Well?" Dick surveyed the young man with considerable interest.

Jim put down his hat and stick. "I will be brief," he said. "I'm here because I want to take my coat off. You understand?"

"Quite." The telephone bell rang. Dick dealt with the call and then confronted him. "What can you do?" he asked.

"I?—nothing. But I am willing to learn."

"There are about five hundred young men at least who have come to me and said that," he answered. "Four hundred and ninety-nine of them were no good—no good at all."

Jim smiled sunnily. "Give me a trial," he said quietly.

"Certainly. But there is no vacancy here. You will have to go to New York."

"Very well."

"There is one more condition. You must live on your pay—twenty-five dollars a month; that is about five pounds."

Jim rose. "Then it's a bargain?" he asked. "Good! we'll shake hands on it. The day after you are married I go to New York on trial. I won't keep you further."

Forster stopped him at the door. "You haven't asked what the work is to be," he said, smiling.

"I shall learn that no doubt in New York."

"No, you can begin here this day week, at 9 A. M. Our hours are from nine to six and twenty minutes for lunch."

Jim nodded cheerfully, put on his hat and marched out. Dick stared at the closed door for a long time. Presently he wheeled sharply, opened a drawer and took out a photograph, which was still in his hand when he rang the bell.

"Mr. Wason," he said to his secretary, "is going to start next week in the office. You will make it as hard for him as the road to Heaven."

He put the photograph back into the drawer. "I wonder," he muttered. The photograph was one of Kitty, taken ten years ago.

CHAPTER XVI

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

Dot and Jim were not the only unexpected visitors that Dick saw that day. Just as he was leaving for an early lunch a card was brought him, and in a minute he was warmly shaking the hand of a dark-eyed man with short brown whiskers.

"So you're back," he said, "and I hope going to stay long enough this time to see me married."

The newcomer showed no surprise. "I know all about that," he answered, smiling. "Has Miss Wason never spoken to you of a particular friend of hers, Violet, by name? Violet happens to be my wife."

"You don't say?" Dick invariably dropped into a colloquialism when he was genuinely surprised. "This is positively amazing."

"Yes, Violet is considerably excited at learning that the great man who is going to marry her friend happens also to be the man who made her husband."

Forster took his arm and carried him off to the restaurant, where Arthur Edwardes supplied him with news in the form of questions. He was accustomed to these delicately-veiled questions from his few intimate friends, who found it difficult to conceal their belief that his engagement to this young girl, speak of it as he might, was only a deliberate move in the carefully constructed programme of an ambitious life. It was precisely the kind of marriage that they had predicted for Forster, an affair of sentiment on the one side, of convenience on the other. When the inevitable wife came she would prove to be a help socially; a well-dressed and well-bred nonentity who would grace his drawing-room, bear him children, and agree neither to criticise nor to interfere. Forster, however, had not selected his nonentity with discrimination. In

the crude language of the city, he could afford to buy the best article in the market; and he had permitted himself to be content with the second-rate, a young girl, charming of course, as hundreds of young girls were, but—and the critics shrugged their shoulders in charitable surprise. Love, they were sure, had nothing to do with it. Dick Forster did not permit any woman, be she duchess or shop-girl, to introduce that disquieting and embarrassing element into his life. And the proof was provided by Miss Wason. Obviously, she was not the girl to sweep a hardened man of the world off his feet. Yet it was curious—very curious. Forster was notoriously deep; the simple from him generally concealed a finished ruse of high war. Friends and critics alike, therefore, had at first wagged their heads wisely and searched below the surface for the evidence of a subtle and masterly stroke of policy, but the evidence was not forthcoming. No, it was a business affair pure and simple, and for once, in a matter of business, Forster had made an error of judgment—just the pardonable error of judgment of the man immersed in affairs, who was determined to be on the safe side.

Dick, neither to-day nor at any time, troubled himself to correct, much lest to contradict, the inferences peeping out so plainly in the polite congratulations of his friends. Even to so intimate an associate as Arthur Edwardes, he replied with the unruffled precision and the meaningless conventionalism with which he always referred to his public or private affairs. That behind the disciplined control and calm speech there existed another man who from boyhood had sought refuge in an inner realm of thought, feeling, aspiration, those who had studied him at close quarters had long ceased to believe. True, he never spoke of his more material ambitions. But their power and character were revealed in his daily life. Hence to his warmest friends Dick had come to represent a rare and striking type—Titanic ambition which severe training had developed into a passionless and automatic egoism—egoism,

certainly, of a sublime kind. For Dick had taught them, again rather by acts than by words, that he was profoundly sympathetic, generous, loyal, straight and true; a man to follow, to admire, worthy of devotion and self-sacrifice; inhuman only that he had, by a marvellous asceticism, slowly shed the weaknesses of other strong men.

Such an apotheosis, however, is always unjust, because it ignores exactly the elements in human nature which have made the hypothesis superficially reasonable, because it assumes, which is impossible, the complete knowledge of a human soul. Kitty, for example, could have told these warm friends of her hero, not that they were wrong, but that they had constructed a fancy picture falsely drawn from misinterpreted facts. And Kitty herself, who knew something of Dick's views about women, suspected, though she could not understand, the subtle and persistent influence of aspirations and ideals as strange as they were real. Whence they came she did not know, but she caught glimpses of them in broken lights—a word, a look, a suppressed remark, a half-finished sentence—more convincingly in the growing recognition that this man of business, supposed to be absorbed in carving a career, had his hours in dreamland, and that he returned stronger for the material struggle from his visit to that mysterious kingdom of the spirit which is within us all if we had the courage to confess it. Perhaps, because she was a woman, she was firmly convinced that it would be to a woman—one woman alone—that Dick would, if ever, really confide the secret in the breath of the winds that never cease to blow in the dreamland of the Spirit, and what answer he gave to the message in their searching wings. And Kitty prayed after her pagan fashion that the one woman would come, demand the confidence and, because she alone had ears for the winds of his dreamland, would not be refused.

Was Dot that woman? She could not say. Kitty, woman though she was, was indeed as puzzled as Dick's mere friends were by his engagement. But to Forster himself

—and he reflected on it often enough—the matter was perfectly clear. Early in life he had framed an ideal of what his wife was to be: the ideal of the young man fired by no ordinary ambition, conscious of his own power and strength. She was to be a woman strong of brain, ambitious as himself, but combining these qualities with the innocence and tenderness, the spiritual and moral refinement denied by Nature to the self-made struggler after fame and fortune. Such a woman would be the supreme and vital element in his career. In his wife, therefore, he must find the realised vision of those aspirations that would touch the material success with the illumination of the ideal, and so make it satisfying. But experience, rightly or wrongly, had slowly but remorselessly convinced him he would fail in the quest: that the woman of his dreams did not exist, and that he must make a choice between the woman who could be a partner of his ambition and the woman who could only appeal through the spiritual in herself to the spiritual in him. Gertrude Wyatt was the one; Dorothy Wason was the other. And he had deliberately chosen Dorothy Wason. She stirred neither his intellect nor his passion. That she loved him as women loved men was a pity; that she could be a partner in the task he had set himself was out of the question; that he could love her as he might have loved Gertrude would be a flaw in the spiritual bond that would bind them together, and would justify his choice. His wife, yes; the mother of his children, probably; but lovers they would not and could not be. Dot, in fact, was to be a rare and delicate possession, what a masterpiece may be to a connoisseur, desirable to own for its rarity and its intrinsic worth, jealously guarded from all harm, but external to the everyday course of human life, and the common and baser needs of men and women. In that vast house of the future of which ambition was the architect, and for which a vast human comedy of clay and passion furnished the material, Dot would adorn and purify the shrine of an inner cham-

ber, but into the rooms where the master lived the life of strife and storm, of humdrum routine and carnal needs, she would not, must not, enter.

Nor did he regret his decision. Dot had not disappointed him. She was all that he had thought, all that he had hoped, all that he desired, and something more—yes, and something more. Dick, so far, was only vaguely conscious of this surprising discovery. Was it not because he had forgotten that the dawn of love in a young woman is only the dawn, and the day that the dawn heralds will bring with it gifts not to be foretold by the cold watchman of the night!

None the less this thought haunted him. What if this charming and innocent girl claimed to be the partner Nature had decided she could not, and for her own sake, must not be? What if he, Richard Forster, by what he had done, by pretending to love her when he only was paying homage to her character and the ideal of one type of womanhood she represented to him—he had created the claim and the right to its satisfaction? What if—and there indeed was the rub—she demanded from him the same love that she gave him, and if he could not give it she would cease to love him, and therefore cease to be the woman he regarded as necessary and thought he had found?

But when lunch was over Edwardes began to toy with his coffee cup rather nervously. He had something to say and he did not know how to say it.

"By the way, is Tom Hennessy dead?" he asked as carelessly as he could.

Forster was roused from his thoughts. "Dead?" he demanded with a touch of acidity. "What makes you think that?"

Edwardes broke into an uncomfortable laugh. "Well," he said, "I was astonished to see Kitty—Kitty Hennessy, you know—yesterday, and she appears to have been in London some time, and—and——"

The uneasy look vanished from Dick's face. "Kitty!" he replied; "surely you have heard that Kitty has been in London off and on for more than two years? But I have no reason to suppose that Hennessy is dead."

The other drained his coffee off. "I think," he said slowly, "you ought to know what people are saying in New York. They've heard of Kitty being in London and —well, they don't mince words—they assert that it's on your money that she's cutting a dash."

"Well?"

"Of course, it's not true," Edwardes hastened to add, "but I felt——"

"It's perfectly true," was the calm interruption.

Edwardes's eyes opened very wide and he pulled at his whiskers in sheer perplexity. "Do you mean, my dear Dick," he managed to ask at last, "do you seriously mean that Kitty Hennessy for two years has been living in London and elsewhere on your money?"

"Of course, for her sake I don't publish the fact, but as you put a point-blank question, my answer is, 'I do seriously mean it.'"

"I hope"—Edwardes laughed uneasily—"that I am not the first who has put that point-blank question."

"You are, and you are the first who has therefore got the answer."

"You are going to marry Miss Wason," Edwardes said slowly. "Her people, I suppose, understand your relations to Kitty and all that." He smiled in vague friendliness.

Dick signalled to the waiter for the bill. "My relations to Kitty," he said quite pleasantly, "are my affair. Of course, if Miss Wason's people thought fit to ask me, I should answer fully. So far they have not thought fit. As for what gossips choose to say, either here or in New York, my dear Arthur, I don't care two snaps of the fingers."

"Speaking as an old friend," the other began earnestly,

"is this indifference of yours quite wise? It is very chivalrous to Kitty—it is magnificent, but is it wise?"

"Oh, come," Dick protested. "What are the facts? Kitty is received by the relations of my *fiancée* into their house. Miss Wason herself has stayed more than once since our engagement was made public in Kitty's house here in London. I put it to you, speaking as an old friend, would that be possible if Mr. Bruce, her uncle, or Mrs. Ottoway, her aunt, or Jim, her brother, attached any importance to the tittle-tattle of scandal? On my honour, they have never so much as hinted that they required any explanation. Why, then, must I thrust one upon them?"

Edwardes waited till the bill was paid. "Don't think me perverse," he said, as Dick counted his change, "but I find my wife knows Kitty slightly. Violet, however, has no idea—that is to say, she is quite ignorant as to—as to Kitty's history. Wouldn't that history make some difference in—in the situation?"

Dick took his hat from the rack. "No," he answered, brushing it with some care, "I think not. Believe me"—Edwardes was both surprised and touched by the restrained passion in his voice—"believe me, my dear Arthur, if there was anything in Kitty's story that I need fear, I should not have dared to propose to make Dot my wife. You don't know her. When you do, you will understand why I have good reason to be confident, and why sometimes it is a man's duty to be silent."

Edwardes was not in the least prepared for this reply. The veiled pride, almost awe, with which Forster referred to his betrothed were strangely puzzling.

"Of course, of course," he interposed hurriedly, "Violet, who is Miss Wason's greatest friend, would, I am sure, say just the same. She does—she does, you know. But even facts that do people credit are certain to be misinterpreted. The world must be taken as it is, Dick——"

"Ah," came the quiet rejoinder, "that might be so if Miss Wason were an ordinary woman. But"—he hesi-

tated, and then added with simple emphasis more impressive than half a dozen sentences—"but she is not."

"You are not afraid of misinterpretation?" Edwardes persisted.

Dick turned on him quickly. "Who is going to misinterpret?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "I must go back to my work," Dick said rather curtly, and Edwardes recognised he had spoken too late and in vain. However, he detained him to add a few sentences on business, and this proved so interesting that the two men resumed their seats in earnest talk. When Edwardes left him, Dick continued to sit in the restaurant chewing the end of a half-smoked cigarette. Suddenly he rose, pitched the cigarette away and walked swiftly into the street. As he passed through the office to his sanctum the clerks and typewriters threw significant glances at each other.

"There's hell coming for someone," one of the young men whispered. "What's up?"

The confidential secretary had caught his master's eye and glided from his place without waiting for the call-bell. He found Dick standing in the centre of the room, very calm.

"Steer," he said—"Steer and his lot are the new men in the syndicate that I spoke about this morning. I've just heard. Steer has come over to take my skin—and he has a pack behind him ready to follow blindfold and they've got pretty powerful backing. So much the better." He rubbed his hands.

"Does Steer know that you, sir, have taken a hand?"

Dick's lips twitched into a curious smile. "Yes," he said. "The secret's been let out as I guessed, and that's why Steer has gone in."

"The secret," the secretary stammered, "let out——?"

"Never mind that," was the quiet reply. "This is going to be a big thing, the biggest thing I've touched yet."

The secretary assured himself the door was closed.

"You can drop out now, sir," he suggested, "if you want to, quite comfortably. Steer and his crew would be mighty well sold if you cut a very slight loss and let them hammer a straw dummy. They might break their knuckles into the bargain."

Forster smiled. "You're a smart lad," he said approvingly, "and that, too, would be a very pretty game. But"—his jaw had become like steel—"Steer wants a fight to a finish, and he shall have it, right now—the biggest fight that Wall Street or Capel Court have seen for some summers. Cut my loss and clear out?—I'm damned if I will! The White Lead Syndicate! It's Richard Forster and all he has they're after, and I'm going to meet them half-way—the whole way, if necessary." The glow in his eyes was like sheet-lightning in the sky of a tropical night. "By God! if that dissipated barn-loafer thinks"—he had controlled himself and thrown off his coat.

"Telephone," he commanded, "to Mrs. Barclay that I may be a little late with my appointment, and cancel that cable to New York. Fresh instructions to follow. If Joe Goulburn has gone for his holiday he must come back."

He had seated himself at his desk while he talked, and in a few minutes messages were speeding through the telephones and a sheaf of cablegrams had been dictated and despatched. Within the emotion was aflame, but his brain was working as if it were packed in ice.

That twenty minutes after lunch had wrought a revolution in the situation. Edwardes had revealed information from which Dick was able to infer that a group of his bitterest enemies, backed by the amplest resources, the men over whose wrecked schemes he had risen to power and wealth, had grasped at the White Lead Syndicate as a means to find the revenge so long desired. They were acting on a betrayed secret; well, they should have their chance; and it would be a fight to a finish, a Titanic trial of strength from which he must either emerge a victor, or

vanquished—a pauper, discredited, a byword in the annals of finance. What, after all, was the bankruptcy of Edward Bruce, the moral disgrace of Lemare, the poverty even of Dot, when measured against the splendid drama that had developed on this vast stage with such magnificent suddenness? It was a challenge and he was not the man to refuse it. Never! never! And now that he had irrevocably committed himself he revelled in the fray. Once more, as ten years ago, he must either justify his belief in himself—justify it to the world by complete success—or be content to become again a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for other men his inferiors. Victory would require the readiness to hazard and sacrifice all that ten years had brought him. But he did not shrink. Quite the contrary. He accepted the conditions with a sober, grim joy.

Human passion had clinched the argument. For the brains, skill, resources of these concealed enemies he had a wholesome respect; to break them once and for all would be a real pleasure; to be defeated by them would be intolerable humiliation and pain. And as they would have no mercy on him, so would he have no mercy on them.

For an hour and a half he worked as he had seldom worked. The clock struck four. Dick locked his desk. Nothing more could be done that day. He signed the letters waiting to be sent out and put on his coat. Ah! Dot's rose! There it was, greeting him with a flower's pathetic silence and its delicate perfume haunted the exhausted air of this prison cell. Only Dot's rose, with its message from a loving, trusting heart. What indeed had this rose, or the girl who had picked it and placed it there, to do with this remorseless, carnal, selfish, struggling world to which he belonged? Nothing—nothing. Rose and its girlish giver were simply an episode, fragrant, and irrelevant—a tiny island of spiritual refreshment in a fairy backwater, aloof from the roaring river of real life. Nothing? Was a woman's love, then, nothing? or was it, after

all, the only thing that mattered? Might it not be that syndicates should rise and fall; men become princes or paupers; wealth dwindle into sordid want; and the human souls that fought and bled for the visible rewards the world could bestow on successful ambition find that, when gained, they crumbled into dust? Might it not be that to have earned and to retain a noble woman's love and a woman's trust was the one divine and imperishable gift that could satisfy for ever? Might it not be that even if the man himself did not love, to trifle with, imperil and perhaps lose a woman's love once asked for and freely given, would bring with it the wages of sin—a pain more intolerable, a humiliation more deep, a damnation more tragic and complete than any defeat in the arena of ambition? Capel Court could give no answer. And Destiny had made Capel Court supreme for the present.

Dick passed out, calm and smiling, into the crowded thoroughfare, where his motor-car awaited him.

"What has he done with the rose he was wearing?" one of the girls whispered to her neighbour as the door closed behind the great man. But the only answer was an impatient shrug of tired shoulders. It was lying, that rose, in the drawer beside Kitty's photograph. The time for its message, its owner had decided, would be when his feet were firmly planted on the neck of the vanquished.

And as Dick sped swiftly westwards a glance at his watch told him that the prices had come over from New York as usual "after hours," and he pictured with vivid satisfaction the wild speculation "in the street," consequent on the unexpected boom on "the other side."

When the Stock Exchange opened again to-morrow White Lead Ordinary would be found to have been hoarsely shouted up at least five points, and at the next settlement there was more than a chance of some good names being hammered—unless the unexpected again happened. But that, as so many other issues in a human world, lay on the knees of very mortal gods and goddesses.

CHAPTER XVII

CONCERNING PHOTOGRAPHS

KITTY stood at the top of the small staircase, with the sun burnishing her hair. "No one," she was saying, "ever enters my private parlour unless he accepts my conditions. They are"—she held up two fingers—"first, that sentiment, and secondly that remarks on anything in the room are absolutely forbidden. Do you accept, Mr. Wason?"

"Hands down; open Sesame!" Jim replied gaily. "But I take leave to observe that I am quite willing, also, to stay outside if you will continue to stand exactly as you are now."

"Why do all men visitors say that?" Kitty threw up her chin, and let the laughter dance in her eyes.

"Do we? I had no idea we were so unselfish. But I propose to add an original comment of my own." Kitty flung a glance of defiance over her shoulder and walked in. Jim sat down on the stairs and waited till the door opened again.

"What is that in your hand?" Kitty had demanded, with a cry of fear and astonishment.

"Only something I'm taking to New York," he replied, preparing to put it in his pocket. "I'm coming in now, please."

Kitty drew a deep breath. "Mr. Wason," she said in a low voice, "where did you get that photograph?"

They faced each other. The colour had gone out of her face, and her lips and fingers were trembling. Jim was singularly calm.

"I got it," he said, "at Oxford. You left it behind you in the house which you rented there, and"—he paused, "and—as it took my fancy, one of the silly young men

who lived in that house, for friendship's sake, gave it to another silly young man—and he has kept it ever since."

Every word in this deliberate sentence stabbed Kitty. She leaned, white and exhausted, against the wall.

"Do you," she said with an effort, "do you mean you had that photograph at Oban?"

"Certainly. Eighteen months before I ever saw Oban."

"Then——" She stopped. Once more she was a prisoner in the cells of the past and the fetters were eating into her aching limbs.

"You forget," he said, holding out the photograph, "that this was taken twelve years ago in New York. It was yourself—do you remember—at Oban who suddenly proved to me that the girl in the photograph was the same as the woman who gave me advice—that, in short, Mrs. Barclay was once Mrs. Hennessy."

"And," she asked eagerly, "have you told Dot?"

"No." He stepped up beside her. "What has Dot to do with it?"

A cry of exquisite relief went up in her pained heart. Perhaps still it was not too late.

"You will give it back to me?" she pleaded, holding out hands of entreaty.

"And"—he had caught them—"and," he asked, "if I do?"

She had wrenched them free. "Oh, keep it," she replied with passionate defiance. "Whether you keep it or destroy it is all the same."

Jim pushed the door open. "To you, perhaps," he said, "but not to me. And if you will give me five minutes I will tell you why. Oh, I shall respect your conditions, Mrs. Barclay." They passed into the room.

A charming and cosy boudoir this: the retreat of a woman to whom flowers and colour and comfort were amongst the good things of life. There was taste, too, untrained, perhaps, but intuitive and soothing in the delicate chintz, the two or three pictures, the Persian carpet

and the old oak furniture. The mantelshelf and writing-table were crowded with photographs, and Jim's eye fell on the small swinging bookcase on which stood a crayon drawing of Richard Forster, strong and fresh as the artist's technique.

"I am going to work in New York," Jim explained curtly, "partly because I wish, mainly because I must." He paused. "A month ago I believed I should never need to work. To-day I know better."

"What do you mean?" Kitty had stepped forward.

"Oh, I am not speaking in jest. To-morrow I may be a beggar, that is all; and beggars must work. I don't mind that—except that it prevents me from saying what I should have said if I were a rich man. There is your photograph, Mrs. Barclay. Dot," he added, "knows I am going into Dick's office in New York. But she does not know my reasons. Keep them a secret, please. She must not be made unhappy before it is necessary; perhaps"—the boy's sunny smile shone out—"it will never be necessary."

Long after he had gone Kitty was still sitting in her large armchair staring at the wall in dumb perplexity. What did it mean? How much did he know? What had he discovered?—obvious, but useless questions, which, nevertheless, recurred again and again. The photograph lay on the floor at her feet where she had let it drop in petulant passion. She picked it up and studied it almost with fierce hatred. A charming maiden of sixteen, with wonderful hair falling on her shoulders, looking out into the fascination of the unknown with untroubled eyes of wistful curiosity—that was the faded picture of herself twelve years ago. Only twelve years!—only twelve years since she had been happy and dreamed not of the evil to come, of the aching heart, of the rebel passions, of the fetters forged by ignorance and innocence. She flung back her arms in weary defiance. Innocent?—yes, she, too, had been innocent, loyal and trusting, and the blood

had throbbed in her body, and health and strength and spirits had whispered that happiness and pleasure were a beautiful girl's right. Pleasure had come so easily, pleasure and homage and what women called love. And then she had learned too late—too late. Her innocence had been a snare; her beauty a lure of the devil; her health and spirits a curse. From the gifts of Nature had been hewed the prison rules of the past, from the dowry of womanhood had been welded, link by link, the fetters that robbed her of freedom. It was unjust and cruel. She would, she must rebel. Free?—yes, she would and could still be free, and no one could rob her of her birthright. So long as beauty and health lasted, so long as there were men in the world, happiness could be won, and when beauty and health were gone, what did anything matter?

And Jim? What could Jim be to her or she to Jim? and to that question there came a swift answer from her heart. He might be nothing to her, but she had been, she still was, something to him. Friends and critics might say they had been excellent comrades, holiday-makers bent on pleasure and taking it when it could be found. They had flirted and chaffed and he had paid the young man's proper tribute to her charm and beauty. To-morrow they would part and all would be well. But Kitty knew better. Even at Oban, still more since, behind the frank *camaraderie*, the delightful and irresponsible gaiety had peeped out the exquisite suggestion of devotion which a woman can never fail to detect, and for which a woman, however frivolous and selfish, will always be grateful. It may sober into friendship; it may flash into love; it may slowly flicker out altogether; but that it has once been seen in a man's eyes or heard in a man's voice, will always be a precious oasis in the monotony of a woman's memory. Ah! if Jim could only be taught that in this gay and beautiful friend, despite all her faults, there really was to be found that which justly deserved the homage of manhood to womanhood!

For Jim's respect was worth the winning. Till to-day she had regarded him as a delightful and gay young man destitute of fibre, stamina and will—the counterpart to the common conception of herself. It was unjust and false. Destiny had intervened with an impressive summons. Jim was facing his fate with a modesty and strength as touching as they were unexpected. Strange—most strange. Whence came his strength? She took up Dot's photograph. Was this hidden power Jim's alone? or did there also lie behind his sister's innocent simplicity the same capacity, if Fate required, for unfaltering courage and obedience to the exacting answer from within to the call of life from without? Kitty turned wearily away. The clock was pointing to half-past four. She must conceal from Dick what had passed, the thoughts that racked her. She snatched at a newspaper and a few lines caught her eye:

"Sir Guy Lemare, the well-known traveller, who is now in New York, is planning an extensive trip to British New Guinea. He will probably not return to England for eighteen months or two years."

"Thank God!" Kitty murmured. Dick would be married and settled before Lemare had come again on the scene. All would go well now. When Lemare came back he would be powerless to harm either Dick or herself. Edward Bruce's gambling would have placed him in Dick's hands—hands strong to save, merciful and merciless.

The door bell rang and Kitty busied herself at the tea-table with the radiance of a great relief. Poor Kitty! She never guessed that the brief paragraph had been inserted by Gertrude Wyatt as a first move in the critical game she was about to play.

Forster drank his tea in silence. His eyes this evening were singularly penetrating, and when Dick looked like that he did not waste time on a woman without good reason.

Presently he lit a cigarette and told her quietly about Steer, while she listened, helpless and dumb.

"Oh!"—she impulsively kneeled on the hearthrug at his feet and laid her head on his knee.

"Yes, in three months I may be back in the gutter—or I may have gained a million or two." He laid a hand on her hair. "Never mind, my dear. You are all right. Whatever happens to me they can't touch you. I've put fifty thousand away for you to-day. It's all I can spare from the fight, but it will keep you in frocks. You must sign the transfers now. Ring for your maid to witness your signature."

The transfers were duly witnessed; Dick went back to his chair, Kitty to her place on the rug at his knee.

"Dick, dear," she whispered, "it's you—you—I only care about. In the gutter—that beast Steer!—oh, why did you ever touch that White Lead robbery?"

But he only smiled. How could a woman understand the game of finance or the motives of the players?

"Whatever happens," she went on, with pathetic confidence, "you will always have Dot."

He leaned over her. "Do you suppose," he demanded quietly, "that if I fail I shall be allowed to marry Dot? I shall not merely be a pauper, mind you, but an adventurer convicted of having done my best to smash the syndicate in which every penny of the family has been invested, of scheming to disgrace Bruce her uncle, Lemare her guardian, and Jim her brother. Steer, damn him, thanks to that gambling lunatic, has pinned me in a corner. He and his gang are playing to wreck me morally, socially, politically. They want revenge more than wealth—revenge! It's a fight, and for my future, my soul and my honour."

Kitty twisted her fingers in the horror of impotent silence.

"They are forcing the pace," he went on icily. "As you know, I meant to defer the fate of the syndicate until

I was back from my honeymoon, when I could by right pay back to my bride's relations what they had lost. Steer and his crew have prevented that. The result will now be known before my wedding-day, and if I fail there will be no wedding."

Kitty sprang to her feet and caught at his arm in sharp anguish. "And Dot—and Dot?" she cried.

"I must refuse." Kitty's arm fell to her side. She stared at him, fascinated, dumb. "I, the discredited pauper, will not marry a woman for the world to say I coveted her wealth, and had so devilishly contrived the chances that either she or I must be rich." He began to pace up and down. "Never!—never!"

She watched him calmly walking to and fro. And out there in those pitiless centres of the world's finance the passion-driven forces of human ambition were at work without ceasing. What did it matter to a blind and omnipotent destiny in the blood and sweat of Nature's laboratory of life that a man's honour and a woman's heart might be broken for ever?

"If," Dick was saying, "if I read Bruce and Mrs. Ottoway aright, there will be no chance of Dot's being still willing. In this world," he added, with a quaint smile, "things never go as one plans. This time, however, the fault is wholly mine. I forgot Steer—and I had no right to ask Dot to marry me. But," he turned sharply, "by God! I mean to fight for Dot to my last dollar—yes, for Dot, so perhaps I shall win."

He was simply thinking aloud, finding utterance for the thoughts that had shaped themselves with increasing clearness as he had driven westwards. When he left the office he had burnt all his boats. The cables to New York and elsewhere had conveyed imperious orders for a struggle that would bring either victory or ruin. There could be no retreat now. But since four o'clock he had had time to reflect, and to measure the consequences alike of failure and success. And, as usual, he had revealed the

working of his mind to a woman, the one friend whom he possessed. It was characteristic of the man that that one friend was a woman, too, who could give him no intellectual help, no spiritual inspiration, in this colossal struggle, simply one for whose sympathy, loyalty and devotion he knew he would not look in vain.

Kitty had sunk back on to the hearthrug, absorbed in her thoughts, when Dick dropped a cablegram into her lap. "Tom," he said abruptly, "has left Buenos Ayres."

She sprang to her feet, fear and anger uniting to prevent the words from coming.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be alarmed," he said quietly. "Before long we shall know what has become of Tom. I'm having all the possible ships searched and he can't go far, because he hasn't the money. It's a nuisance coming on the top of this other business, but——"

"Steer!" Kitty interrupted sharply. "Do you think that beast Steer has found out about Tom?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if Steer has given him the money and is bringing him to England?"

Dick reflected on this seriously, rather annoyed that it was left to Kitty to suggest the idea. "Tom," he said slowly, "can do Steer and his lot no good. They know enough about Tom not to waste a cent on a drunkard who cannot assist them in any way to strip me of my money. No, no," he added, with conviction. "I am absolutely certain Steer hasn't a hand in this."

Kitty took a turn up and down the room. "You are right, Dick," she said. "Tom can't break you; he can only break me."

"And he won't do that," was the reply, "for the simple reason that you have the whip hand of him, my dear, if he tries that game."

"The whip hand!" She shrugged her shoulders wearily. "That is never any use to a woman." She lay

back in her chair with closed eyes. A man's burden may be shared, was her bitter reflection, but a woman's, just because she is a woman, must be borne alone.

Dick sat down beside her and took her hand. He had something more to say, and the sight of her radiant beauty, blanched by the trouble within, made him desire to say it as gently as he could. "I am not going to desert you, Kitty," he began. "Whatever happens I stand by you. But for the next few weeks we must not make any mistakes. Come, give me another cup of tea."

She obeyed listlessly and Dick sipped his tea between meditative puffs at his cigarette. Then he proceeded to tell her in matter-of-fact tones about his interview with Jim. "That young man," he wound up, "means business. He is going to make a job of it, and I'm going to help him. I daresay he won't like my treatment, but," he smilingly put the cup down, "with your help too, we'll put him on his feet."

"My help?" She was rearranging the photographs on her writing-table. She could not face those penetrating eyes.

He paused, and came to the point with calm frankness. "You have got to persuade him that he must not fall in love with you."

Kitty wheeled sharply. Something like defiance flashed in face and figure.

"Think, Kitty," he urged, "and you will see I am right. Is it fair to let Jim fall in love with you when you know that you cannot marry him? But leave Jim out of the question. Look at it only from your own point of view. Unless you pull him up now you will have to explain——"

"I am free," she interrupted with suppressed passion. "Tom has no legal hold on me—none—none."

He controlled his surprise. "Well?" he remarked coldly.

Kitty had mastered herself again. "Am I," she asked, "am I the only person who is obliged to conceal the facts?

What about yourself, Dick?" She walked up to him. "Some day you too will have to explain."

"To whom?" His surprise was growing.

"To Dot—yes, to Dot. Oh, I don't mean about the White Lead Syndicate and all that. No woman who really loves would care a straw whether Steer succeeds or fails, or would bother about the ins and outs of a financial battle. Steer and Lemare and Bruce and you are all tarred with the same brush, but she would care a great deal as to whether she had been deceived by the man to whom she had given her heart. Dot is an innocent girl who loves you. You are proud of her, admire her; you will give her wealth and worship of a kind. That is no good. She wants, and will want, only your love. And some day you will have to explain that that is the only thing you will not give her."

"Perhaps," he replied slowly, "perhaps in time I may come to love her too."

"Perhaps," she echoed, with a gesture half of pity, half of contempt—"perhaps." The light flashed in her eyes and hair. "Dot," she said, "has fallen in love with one Richard Forster. But what does she know of this other Richard Forster, the real man? Take care, Dick, take care. You may find that the truth is as dangerous and disagreeable to a man as it can be to a woman."

He buttoned up his coat. "Speak plainly," he said.

"I mean to." She faced him. "If you are wise you will tell Dot to-morrow the whole naked truth, your story and mine, from beginning to end—the White Lead business —everything—everything."

The advice was quite unexpected and he weighed it in silence. "No," he pronounced, "no; that is impossible."

"Why?" He searched her face without replying. "Are you afraid to tell the truth to the girl who will be your wife?"

Again his calm cold eyes pierced her through and through. Kitty saw no fear in them—nothing but the

desire to penetrate the reasons for her words and an inflexible adherence to his own ideas.

"If," he said at last, "if I fail, the truth now will not save me. But," and she knew that self-controlled tone, "if I succeed I should to-day only inflict on Dot unnecessary pain. If she asks, that is another matter. You forget I am fighting to preserve, as a man ought, the innocence of the woman who will be his wife."

"You are wrong, Dick," she pronounced, with slow emphasis, "quite wrong. Dot is not a child. She is a woman, and you ought not, you cannot, keep the truth from a woman. The truth will do her no harm now. A month, two months hence, it may be too late."

"I have thought it out," he replied, "and I prefer to take the risk."

"So be it," she said in despair, "so be it." Then her emotion gathered strength. "But whether you fail or whether you win, God help you both—I cannot."

"I am not afraid," he added, with a quiet pride, "because I know Dot."

Impulsively she took up a photograph—Dot, as Oban had seen her after love had come into her life. "Ah!" she murmured, with a touch of pain, "ah! I wonder."

He gathered up his papers, counted them, and then methodically endorsed them. "And Jim?" he inquired, with his hand on the door.

Kitty's face grew hard. "The innocent Jim?" she repeated with a little laugh, "oh, the game of concealment must be played out, of course. A woman's innocence can obliterate a man's past. But when it is the woman who needs the help of a man's innocence she may not have it. I don't think Jim will need pulling up, but if he does," she had turned her back on him to open a drawer in the writing-table, "I will obey."

She had again surprised him, and he went away in silence.

Kitty was studying a photograph, across a corner of

which was scrawled in a boyish hand, "*J. W., Oban, July 23rd.*" Suddenly she kneeled down and put a match to the fire, watching it slowly crackle into a bright flame. Then she took a book down from the shelf where her few favourite volumes rested. It was a copy of *The Book of the Spiritual Life,* and the fly-leaf showed that it had been given her by Dick two years ago. She turned a page or two and hesitated. But the volume was spared. Instead, she tore the photograph into tiny pieces and threw them into the flames. Dry-eyed she watched them shrivel. "Thou shalt go without!"—"Thou shalt go without!" The command of the priest, the ascetic, the loveless, the inhuman. Yet life as interpreted by friends and foes alike had no other message. Useless to rebel. A man might shake off his fetters, a woman never.

But when the last fragment of Jim's photograph had twisted into charred dust, she flung herself on to the sofa in a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

AMATEURS AND EXPERTS

"THE modern clamour for efficiency," Mr. Bruce was remarking in his most cheerful tones, "is the silliest of shibboleths—the silliest and the most mischievous." He plucked a juicy mulberry from the drooping branch above his head, and repeated the remark with amiable emphasis, running his friendly eyes over the group dotted on the lawn round his comfortable armchair—Kitty at work on a piece of embroidery; Gertrude listening to the law as regards bridesmaids, laid down by Mrs. Ottoway, sitting with Roman rectitude in her straight-backed chair, and her hands lost in the bloated pug on her lap; Dot, hatless and dreamy, on her knees, playing with the silky ears of her prize setter, and Dick, apparently studying the crimson tint of the creepers on the warm bricks of the south front of the Manor House.

"My dear Dick," Mr. Bruce proceeded, "I am very glad that last night you took occasion to make in your speech some justly trenchant criticisms on this preposterous parrot-cry for efficiency."

"Efficiency," Gertrude quietly interpolated, "efficiency with politicians generally furnishes a synonym for their own self-sufficiency."

"Precisely, precisely." Mr. Bruce nodded his approval and tried another mulberry. He might well be in exuberant good humour. The shares of the White Lead Syndicate for the past week had been rising by sharp sprints every day, and consequently everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

No one indeed, at sight of this family party enjoying the September sunshine in a charming old English garden,

but would have inferred that already the forthcoming marriage had cast a blissful atmosphere of happiness on the men and women who were dallying the afternoon through in the shade of the glowing mulberry and maple. Kitty, however, was covertly trying to read from Dick's face how the fight was going. He had just arrived from London, and had scarcely said more than half a dozen words. What did that silence mean? The tired look in his eyes, the deep-cut lines at the corner of his mouth, were ominously significant. Kitty, as she counted her stitches, felt her heart ache and her soft eyes were dimmed with the tears of fear. Suddenly Dot rose, smoothed her tumbled hair, and stole over to Dick's chair.

"You are quite worn out," she whispered. The setter had faithfully followed her, and thrust a cool and sympathetic nose into his future master's hand. "Come down to the lake, dear, and I will punt all the weariness out of you. You will?"

He looked up and patted the slim finger on his shoulder. "After tea," he whispered in reply. Kitty's watchful gaze had noticed with a touch of anxious curiosity that the girl's action had drawn a gleam from Gertrude's eyes, although she had apparently wholly ignored the brief interlude between the lovers. Dick threw his cigarette away and wheeled his chair round. "I was alluding in my speech," he said deliberately, "to the cry for efficiency by amateurs. I don't believe in amateurs. I believe only in experts."

Gertrude glanced with an amused smile at Mr. Bruce, who ceased to twirl his watch-chain. "Ah, experts," he retorted, amiably. "Experts to be sure. Blessed word! But what is an expert?"

Dick stretched his legs. "They can't be defined, but I know them when I have done business with them."

"Well, now, am I an amateur or an expert?" Mr. Bruce demanded. "Take your own subject for example, finance. I put it this way. The professionals would have

us believe that no one but the professionals can understand the mysteries of finance. They talk of it as if it were a fetish, a kind of Ju-Ju worship, as if no one but a few Mandarins or medicine-men who carry on their rites in a baffling jargon can hope to do anything in finance. High Finance with a big F and a big H. It's pure bluff, my dear Dick—like the notices in the wood over there, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' Trespassers will not be prosecuted because there is no such offence as trespassing. But I put it up as every landowner does with his tongue in his cheek and by my bluffing keep the wood to myself and my friends. Yet every now and then there comes a level-headed fellow, an amateur in law but with the amateur's common sense, and he just walks through my wood and discovers what a selfish humbug I am."

"But he can't shoot the pheasants, Uncle Edward," Dot remarked, "and he may put his foot into a rabbit-hole and sprain his ankle badly. The Mandarins know where the rabbit-holes in their woods are, don't they? If they don't, they are not fit to be Mandarins."

The corners of Dick's mouth twisted into a quiet smile. Mr. Bruce, with a deprecatory wave of his plump hand, ignored the interruption.

"And your moral, Mr. Bruce?" Gertrude broke the silence.

"Just this, my dear young lady. That in finance, as in everything else, it is educated common sense that wins in the long run—and Dick there is the proof."

Dick seemed to be counting the number of red leaves of the ampelopsis on the billiard-room window on the terrace. Mr. Bruce looked at the mulberries, wavered, and abstained with a suggestive sigh.

"I don't profess," he remarked genially, "to have had more than a decent education, Eton and Oxford and all that, you know; but I have common sense. I have selected my investments with the prudence of the educated amateur, and though I haven't found a gold-mine of diamonds," he

shook a playful finger at Dick—"only the Mandarins can do that—I have done very well, and I shall do better."

Kitty had ceased to embroider. She was looking from Richard Forster to Edward Bruce with searching anxiety.

"I agree," Gertrude remarked calmly. "So far I have not regretted your advice, Mr. Bruce, to buy the shares of the White Lead Syndicate." She picked the morning newspaper from Mrs. Ottoway's work-basket. "They are simply booming. It is extraordinary—as common sense always is."

Dick sat up slowly. "You, too, Miss Wyatt," he asked, with cool curiosity, "have gone in for White Leads?"

Gertrude folded the paper. "I took the advice of an amateur," she answered, "and crawled in on what the medicine men call the ground floor."

"And you will come out at the attics," Mr. Bruce interpolated, beaming.

"Well," Dick said quietly, "I should sell out now and take all the profit I could while it is to be had."

Gertrude, like Kitty, was measuring the meaning of Dick's tired eyes. "What do you say, Mr. Bruce?" she inquired, with delicate sarcasm.

Edward Bruce continued to shake a gay forefinger at Dick. "Hold on," he said. "They're going higher. I am sure of it."

"You don't agree?" Gertrude challenged Dick with a saucy flick of her scarf.

"I am only an expert," he retorted, "and experts don't believe enough in their self-sufficiency to prophesy. What do you think, Mrs. Ottoway?"

"When I was a girl," Mrs. Ottoway replied, in her staccato, so pleasantly touched by acidity, "women were not asked to think about such things. They were expected to devote their attention to their babies, if they had any, and the sphere that Providence has ordained for them. My dear Richard, there are two things I absolutely decline to understand. Finance is one, and the other is——"

"The wretched modern girl," Dot had again broken in with her naughtiest laugh. "Am I not right, Aunt Elsa?"

Mrs. Ottoway surveyed her from over the bloated pug. "You are perfectly right, Dorothy," she replied. "You are absolutely unintelligible, and that nearly amounts to indelicacy in a young woman. It is three weeks from your wedding to-day, and I cannot get you to take the faintest interest in a single detail, not even in the bridesmaids' dresses. You waste your hours, hatless, I may say shoeless even, in a scrimpy cotton frock, in the company of two muddy and damp dogs, whose ridiculous names are enough to condemn them."

"So you have been paddling again?" Dick demanded, stooping over the setter. "Dorothy, I am ashamed of you."

Dot shook demurely the delicate wimples of her muslin dress. "I couldn't go along the brook in this," she said, "now could I? and I should like to see you, Aunt Elsa, get a rat out of a hole on the bank two feet under the water without taking your shoes and stockings off." Kitty bubbled off into laughter. "And there was no one there but Savonarola," she laid a hand on the setter's head, "and the gardener, and because he is a married expert he took his boots off too."

"These high schools, these high schools!" Dick murmured.

"You are right, Richard," Mrs. Ottoway pronounced emphatically. "I never approved of high schools and I never will. It was wholly against my wish that Dorothy was sent to a high school; but it was her father's command, and the result is, as you see, deplorable. I know only too well that in a mixed middle-class institution a girl must grow up saturated with *bourgeois* ideas, the ideas of the rough hoydens of the middle-class. When I was a girl, schoolmistresses thought it more important to teach manners than to prattle about mind. Mind!—the mind of

the middle-class!" She let her hands sink in expressive disgust into the folds of the pug's neck.

"It is really not so different, Mrs. Ottoway," Gertrude remarked. "In your day, women were under the delusion that manners would produce mind: the mother of to-day was the result; these mothers, in despair, hoped that mind would produce manners, and the result is a carnival of middle-class hoydenism. The girl of the future will devote herself to her body, because the body of the middle-class girl is the one asset of any value left to the British nation."

Mrs. Ottoway leaned back in stiff disapproval. "There!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I knew that must happen." A footman bringing out tea to be laid under the cedar guarding the clematis-covered arbour by the lake, where the swans were waiting with statuesque dignity to share in the meal, had tripped, with a crash of crockery, over Savonarola's twin sister. "I dreamed last night of the Royal family, and I knew I should wake with neuralgia and come down to find a telegraph boy flirting with the scullery-maid." She dived into her work-basket and produced a yellow envelope. "It's not enough for Thomas to break the second best Worcester but Violet must needs invite herself to come and stay."

"Violet!" Dot had leapt to her feet. "And you never told us, Aunt Elsa. Violet coming! How jolly! Savvy Savvy"—she rolled the setter over—"we must go and tell Romola that Violet is coming." But Romola having upset the footman was already racing across the lawn to ask for approval, and to find it, needless to say.

"When I dream of the Royal family," Mrs. Ottoway pursued austerely, "everything that is disagreeable happens together. Violet is bringing her husband, that ugly fat man of business who wears whiskers because I particularly dislike them, as if Violet did not know that I detest all men with whiskers who are something mysterious in the city, for it is always something discreditable."

"I hope," murmured Dick, "those without whiskers are exceptions."

"Don't take me up so sharply, Richard. You know perfectly well what I mean. Why must you all be so peevish this afternoon?"

"Not peevish, but strenuous, Aunt Elsa," Dot replied, and as if she had forgotten she was no longer in the despised skimpy cotton frock, she took the unrepentant Romola into her lap. "I dreamed last night of the President of the United States, or the German Emperor, I forget which, and that, as Jim says, is enough to make even a middle-class girl strenuous."

Gertrude, who had been patiently waiting for an opportunity to turn the conversation, now calmly intervened.

"Mrs. Barclay," she said, with the clear intonation of a stage aside, "mamma felt sure you would be interested to know that quite by accident the other day she had heard some news of an old friend of hers, a Mr. Hennessy," she paused, "a Mr. Hennessy who for years she had thought was dead."

The blood leaped into Kitty's face and as suddenly ebbed away, while she stared in dumb bewilderment at Gertrude. Dick had moved a few yards away with Mr. Bruce and had not heard the remark. Dot, too, now lying full length on the grass, with her chin resting on a dog's head, paid no heed, but Kitty was aware that not merely Gertrude's friendly eyes, but Mrs. Ottoway's searching gaze were riveted on her.

"You are surprised," Gertrude added gently. "So was mamma intensely surprised. I myself have never seen this Mr. Hennessy, but years ago mamma knew him in New York. He is living now at Buenos Ayres."

"At Buenos Ayres?" Kitty repeated, without knowing what she said.

"Buenos Ayres," Mrs. Ottoway echoed, as if the name tasted unpleasantly. "Isn't that in South America?

Your mother's friend, Gertrude, I suppose, has come to grief."

"Mamma," Gertrude replied imperturbably, "has always had some very peculiar friends. But you knew Mr. Hennessy too, in your married days in New York, did you not, Mrs. Barclay?"

She picked the fallen piece of embroidery from the grass and thereby gracefully prevented Kitty from concealing her growing dismay from Mrs. Ottoway's remorseless scrutiny.

"Yes," Kitty said slowly. "I knew Mr. Hennessy once in New York"

A moment's silence broken only by three snaps from Romola at a gnat. Kitty tried to look round in the vain hope of gaining Dick's attention. Her temples were throbbing with pain, her fingers were cold, and in front of her Gertrude sat smiling, friendly and mysteriously calm. What did this girl know? Why had she spoken? What reply did she expect? Poor Kitty could only recall Dick's momentous words—"For the next few weeks we must not make any mistakes," and sit crushed by the knowledge that a false step now might precipitate the crisis that Dick was straining all his power to avert.

"That young man you sent down is a very clever young fellow," came Mr. Bruce's cheery voice, "an expert, if you like." He laughed genially. "By making a dam at the west end there we can put the power-house in the coppice, and by the time you are back from your honeymoon and settled in, Dot will find electric light in the old Manor House. I can show you the whole thing before tea."

The two gentlemen promptly strolled down the sloping lawn towards the lake. Kitty recognised that she was left alone to cope with the unfathomed knowledge of Gertrude Wyatt and the hostile curiosity of Mrs. Ottoway. Never had she felt so helpless.

Gertrude, too, breathed a little more freely. For a false step on her part, too, would be fatal. Her object

must be gained without rousing the slightest resentment against herself from Dick. And Fate, by removing him at this moment, had done the one thing she required. For Gertrude had no intention of intervening as a principal in the *dénoûment* to which events, some prepared, some beyond her control, were now steadily marching. Hers was only the task of paving the way, of creating the atmosphere of suspicion, curiosity and growing fear. The decisive blow would be struck in good time by another hand, armed, it is true, and taught by herself, but a hand with the legal and moral authority that would leave herself, an innocent and sympathetic looker-on of a catastrophe in which she had no share. Hence she had previously calmed Kitty's fears as to Sir Guy Lemare's movements by informing her, as we have seen, publicly, that the great traveller had no intention of returning to England. Neither Kitty nor Dick must be allowed to prepare a counter-stroke. Yes, everything was developing extremely well—just as she had planned it should.

Two days previously Steer, chuckling with savage joy, had dropped in for tea at the flat, as he so often did now.

"We are going to win," he had said. "Forster, for once, has got into deeper water than he reckoned. It will be over his head, Miss Gertrude, before long, and there'll be strong hands to hold him down once he sinks. In three or four weeks we shall be pegging a drowned man's skin out to dry, and you too," he winked, "will have some money to spend then. What?"

He winked again when he left, and Gertrude promised herself that some day Dick should teach Mr. Steer that in some things a woman may be compelled to acquiesce, but that there are wrongs she can neither forget nor forgive. That, indeed, was a day to look forward to, to dream about, to live for.

"Did Mr. Forster, too, know this—this——?" Mrs. Ottoway was questioning, and stumbled over the name. Gertrude quietly supplied the omission, anxious indeed that

it should be carefully impressed on her memory. "Did Mr. Forster know this Mr. Hennessy?"

Kitty was aware she was expected to answer. "I think he did," she replied at last, adding hurriedly—"yes, I am sure he did."

"Then he was a friend of you both?" Mrs. Ottoway inquired, and Kitty wondered what she was to say. "Hennessy—Hennessy?" Mrs. Ottoway glided on. "I suppose he wasn't one of the Hennessys of Sutton Ashwell?"

"Mamma could tell you for certain," Gertrude remarked. "But now I come to think of it, I am sure it was at Sutton Ashwell mamma got to know him. She used to go to Sutton Ashwell a good deal once, didn't she?"

Mrs. Ottoway pursed up her lips. "If it is that Mr. Hennessy," she said, in her iciest tones, "I would rather we dropped the subject, Gertrude. Even if his wife did desert him, he is not a fit person to talk about in the presence of Dot."

Kitty felt that the mulberry tree was dissolving into a mist of red leaves and yellow fruit. The unseen fingers of Fate were choking her breath.

"I am very sorry I spoke at all," Gertrude said gently. "But I had no idea Mr. Hennessy had married. Mamma never——"

"Why did his wife desert him?"

Dot had sat up and put the question with a charm that startled her audience. Romola and Savonarola sat up too, their amber eyes very bright.

"Dorothy," Mrs. Ottoway said, "go and see if tea is ready, and if it is, let your uncle know."

But Dot, instead of obeying, confronted her aunt. "May I not have an answer to my question?" she asked slowly.

Gertrude turned her eyes on the slim figure in the dainty muslin frock. This calm defiance, so unusual in her young friend, was deeply interesting.

"Don't you think, Mrs. Ottoway," she said quietly, "that we are all entitled to a little more information?"

Mrs. Ottoway shrugged her shoulders. "Mr. Hennessy," she said, "was trapped into marrying the daughter of a low restaurant-keeper. It is not surprising therefore that his wife deserted him." The logical connection was certainly not clear, but by rising she intimated that the topic was dismissed. "And now we will have tea."

The pug waddled away followed by his mistress and Gertrude. But Dot dropped on her knees beside Kitty's chair. "What is the matter?" she asked anxiously. "Are you not well?"

"It is nothing," Kitty murmured, with closed eyes. "I felt a little faint, the heat I suppose, but it has passed."

Dot pulled one of her rings off. "Savvy," she whispered to the setter, whose tail was thumping the lawn, "Savvy, go and find him," she commanded, placing the ring between his teeth—"go and bring Dick," and Savonarola promptly leaped off on his errand. Romola as promptly uttered a sharp howl of disapproval. Why indeed, must the male sex be so favoured? This was a lady's commission, surely. So Dot had to take another ring, and such was Romola's zeal that she did not wait to run round the long way through the azalea shrubberies, over the bridges and through the wood of hazel and filberts; she plunged straight across the stream and, swimming fiercely, pushed the ring into Dick's hand, together with much good water on his trousers, just as Savvy was proudly brushing through the golden bracken, and then the victorious Romola condescended to show her brother the quickest way back to the mulberry tree.

"Kitty is rather tired," Dot said, as Dick came striding up the lawn, "so I sent for you to say that she and I are going to have tea by ourselves indoors. You won't mind my putting off the punt till after she has gone, will you?"

They stood for a moment together while Dick restored her rings. Gertrude, under the cedars, compelled to listen to Mrs. Ottoway's dogmatisms on millinery, could see how they both lingered over this simple act. And though Dick came straight to the tea-table and talked to herself uninterruptedly in the most charming way, nothing could ease the pain at her heart. That that child should have the right to make Richard Forster come and go, and that Richard Forster should enjoy obedience to a schoolgirl's whims, marred all the pleasure at the success with which she had engineered the conversation.

Mrs. Ottoway, too, was in a very bad temper. Dot's question and her calmly carrying away of Kitty were not merely an act of defiance. They were a sharp and unmistakable criticism on her aunt. Gertrude pondered on the fact earnestly while Dick discussed one topic after another with a singular gentleness of tone. How tired he looked and yet how strong, as if the tremendous struggle through which Gertrude knew so well he was passing had by its intensity purified and refined all that was best in him. She loved him all the more that he faced his terrible fate with such unfaltering self-restraint.

Kitty and she were both returning to London by train, and when the carriage was announced the younger woman availed herself of the opportunity for a delicate stroke and a generous speech. They were standing in the hall, so that they could all hear.

"I hope your head is better, Mrs. Barclay," she said quietly; "I am afraid my thoughtlessness this afternoon in bringing up a disagreeable topic about which I really knew nothing, helped to make it worse. I am very sorry."

Dot could not conceal her pleasure, and Kitty's face showed that a great burden had suddenly been lifted from her mind. Miss Wyatt was so obviously sincere in her ignorance, her tone was so friendly, that it would not be necessary to mention the painful episode to Dick. Kitty, of course, could not be expected to divine that this was the

precise reason why Gertrude had spoken. She had had much experience of clever and ambitious men; she had never been pitted yet against a clever and ambitious woman.

"Have you seen the evening paper?" Mr. Bruce demanded of the company generally. "White Lead Syndicate shares have risen two points to-day. What did I say, eh?"—he poked Dick slyly in the ribs. "What did I say?" he repeated, in the most boisterous good humour.

Dick had taken the evening newspaper and was reading it carefully.

"Perhaps," he said at last, "they will go still higher." Tone and look alike conveyed nothing but sheer indifference.

"So they will," Mr. Bruce remarked, "so they will, mark my words."

"You are leaving your book, Miss Wyatt," Dick said, coming forward. Kitty had already seated herself in the carriage, and Gertrude turned back. They were alone in the hall. "Sell out," he pronounced in a low voice as he handed it to her.

The girl studied his face as she smiled her thanks for the volume.

"Sell out to-morrow," Dick repeated, after a pause. "In New York—in New York."

Gertrude made no sign that she heard, but Dick, self-controlled man as he was, read in that brief glance a message that thrilled all the dormant passion that this woman alone was able to awake.

"Dick," a loving arm was thrust into his, "now I can have you all to myself."

He started. He was alone in the hall with Dot, Dot, standing just where Gertrude had stood, and so different, so utterly different.

"Yes," he said, drawing her to him as if he needed protection, "yes it is time you had me all to yourself."

CHAPTER XIX

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

GERTRUDE WYATT came out slowly and thoughtfully from the offices of the big steamship company in the city where she had been making some very particular inquiries. It was early on a fine Saturday morning, and she had just learned that the great steamer was due about midday and that the special train would land its travellers at the London terminus that afternoon, probably between four and five. The clerk had readily volunteered a promise to this affable beauty that he would telephone the precise hour to her flat as soon as he knew it, and now for a few minutes Gertrude debated with herself whether she was to send a telegram or not to Southampton to meet the boat. The form already written out was in her hand, but with sudden decision she tore it in pieces, which she carefully placed in the small purse-bag hanging on her wrist. A more careless woman might have let the paper fragments blow away in the gutter, but Gertrude Wyatt was learning much in this tremendous struggle in which she was engaged. Strange things happened in a world dominated by chance, and though it was a small matter, she was determined to guard against the risk of that telegram or a piece of it falling into hands for which it was not intended. The attention to detail was characteristic of the girl who was playing for her future in competition with the trained brains of the Titans of business.

From the steamship offices she walked briskly to Austin Friars, where she had a short interview with the junior partner in a well-known firm of brokers. The junior partner was young and unmarried and he gallantly escorted her to the door. His unconcealed admiration for her beauty was heightened by his even greater respect for the

client, so marvellously well-informed. Where that knowledge came from he had not learned; but that it came "from the inside," the heart of "the inside," Austin Friars and Capel Court had no doubt. The heart of "the inside," experience had taught him, can be an intensely human heart; its weaknesses are the weaknesses of youth as well as of old age. Feminine client and broker accordingly stood talking for a minute.

"You will find the contract note when you get home again," the junior partner said, smiling. "We sent it by hand as you wished." He glanced casually at the passers-by. "Ah!" he remarked, with a flash of astonishment, "Why, there is Forster—Richard Forster himself." Gertrude noted with a thrill of the deepest pleasure the involuntary tinge of awe that had crept into his voice. "He too is early," he added, laughing, as if the figure a few yards away was connected with a subject they had been discussing.

Dick nodded to the man to whom he was talking and then came past the door.

"Good-morning, Miss Wyatt," he said quietly, just as if he expected to see her at that precise place at that precise hour.

"Ah!" said the junior partner to himself softly as he mounted the stairs—"ah!"

But as Gertrude sat in her hansom driving westwards, those five minutes with Dick had caused her thoughts to flow from and to that muscular figure in the loose blue serge suit. Tired? Yes, Dick was terribly tired, and there were dark lines she had never noticed before under his eyes. She guessed rightly that while Edward Bruce had been sleeping dreamlessly, and Dot with Savvy and Romola on their cushions outside her door had been dreaming a happy maiden's dreams, Richard Forster had heard the iron tongue of night count the hours of his work, that the rays of the September dawn had only bid him switch off the electric light and ring for some biscuits and

a whisky and soda with which to commence another day's struggle for wealth and honour.

"Mr. Steer is waiting to see you, miss," the parlour-maid said as Gertrude let herself in, "and a messenger boy left this half an hour ago."

The news that Steer was waiting, so far from surprising her, seemed to be what she wished and perhaps expected. Then she broke the seal on the envelope and glanced at its contents. It was the contract note of which the junior partner had spoken, and she studied the main item on the sheet of paper—a large sum running into five figures. The dark rings under Richard Forster's sleepless eyes seemed to follow her as she stepped cool, lithe and dignified into the drawing-room, where the one note of colour in its Grecian severity came from the silver bowl of blood-red dahlias on the centre table.

Steer, in an aggressively light grey suit, was pacing up and down as she entered. His cheeks were sunburnt, but the tan only emphasised how tired his eyes too were.

"You didn't expect to see me, I guess," he began in his coarse, familiar way.

"No, I thought you were in Devonshire." She sat down in her favourite place, the long sofa against the wall, with an exquisite copy in marble of the Winged Victory of the Louvre above her head.

"So I was, till 10 P. M. last night. But I was fetched back rather suddenly."

"I hope there is nothing wrong?"

"I'm going to talk about that," he said, drawing up his chair. "There's been a bad slump in the shares in New York, a panicky slump," he went on, his voice dropping hoarsely. "A regular bear-raid, it seems, followed by a collapse."

"Indeed?" Gertrude was genuinely surprised. "I had to go and do some business for mamma this morning in the city, and I happened to meet her broker. He told me the shares were a strong and rising market; that was

his expression—'a strong and rising market.' There were no signs of a slump here. I don't understand it."

"That's so. The slump in Wall Street was after hours over there; it will only be trickling in on our Exchange now. But unless the rot is stopped there'll be a panic here too, and God knows what may happen then. To-day is Saturday, however, and that's a good thing."

He pushed back his chair and began to pace up and down.

"If matters are serious," Gertrude asked quickly, "why are you wasting your time here, Mr. Steer? Ought you not to be in the city?"

"There are two things," he said, reseating himself, "that want explanation. First, a big block of White Lead shares was sold in New York yesterday. We want to know who sold those shares. The sale broke the market and really began the panic."

"Will you kindly explain?" Gertrude interposed sweetly.

"It's this way. Our plan was to make a corner in the shares; we practically had done so; we were making a market to sell on generally—you understand me? Well, we had Forster caught short and we were forcing the price up every day so that presently we should have had him at our mercy. But someone—someone who has been got at—has sold, and that game is up, for the market's broken—broken. It's been devilishly well done, for the shares—real shares for delivery—were sold in New York by cable from this side at the last moment, just before the panic set in. Of course it's Forster, but whom has Forster got at?"

Gertrude relieved her excitement by a low whisper.

"Is it Mr. Bruce?" she asked.

"It must be Bruce," Steer said. "Bruce has got frightened, or been cajoled by Forster. He swore to us he wouldn't sell a sixpenceworth until we gave our consent; but Forster, damn him, has rushed him."

"Can't you find out by telegram?" Gertrude inquired eagerly.

"We wired of course this morning, but Bruce has gone shooting to the other side of the county, and no one knows exactly to which of two places he has gone. There were only women in the Manor House—women," he repeated with fierce scorn. "He was invited to both, and he won't be back till late after dinner. That is Forster's hand again, curse him!"

"Richard Forster," she said with intense conviction, "seems to do things with some care."

Steer's reply was a savage growl, the growl of the wounded beast that cannot get at the enemy who has wounded him.

"And what," she inquired at last, "is the second thing that requires explanation?"

A cooler observer than Steer at that moment would have inferred that she plainly desired to get away from the question as to who had sold those shares.

Steer looked up. This girl was not usually so stupid. "We want to know obviously," he said, "what caused the slump. The break of the market over there is not enough to account for that. Some rumour, some infernal lie, has of course been spread by Forster—allowed to dribble out slowly after hours just to open the sluices, and engineer a big tidal wave for to-day on both sides. That lie is being kept deuced tight in two or three hands, and won't be let out till Forster chooses. It will do its work all the better for that, and he knows it, he knows it."

"Well?" said Gertrude impatiently.

Steer's manner changed. "Miss Wyatt," he said as coaxingly as he could, "it's my own idea, I have come to you without telling a soul, to ask you to go to Forster; he's a friend of yours, you've always said so; you're a woman who can get anything out of a man, if you choose. Will you go to Forster right now and get the secret out of him before Sunday afternoon, so that we may

cable in time what this lie is that has caused the slump."

Gertrude smiled, for Steer prided himself, not only on his knowledge and experience of women, but on his own powers to bend them to his will.

"But," she objected, with an air of charming coquetry and diffidence, "won't Mr. Forster guess who has persuaded me to come?"

"Not he. Dick Forster hasn't an idea you have ever heard of me, you've told me so yourself more than once. You and I are pals in this business behind the curtain, what? No, no, you can go safely on your own." He caught her hand. "Play the widowed mother, the only daughter on him, the girl who has foolishly gone in for a bit of gamble and wants his advice, the advice of the great man, the kind friend of a girl who really loves him—what?" He winked in his eagerness and his pleading tones grew in their warm familiarity. "Ginger him up, jolly him, I say, as you know how, and he'll tell you—oh, he'll tell you the truth." He paused to add with solemn conviction—"It's a matter of life and death to you, Gertrude Wyatt, for if we don't find out that secret in time to cable before Sunday morning, you may lose every penny you possess—every penny."

Gertrude reflected with an air of the most natural hesitation. Then she rose.

"I will go," she said simply.

Steer sprang forward to express his boisterous gratitude.

"The telephone, please, miss," said the parlour-maid; "a gentleman wishes to speak with you on the telephone."

That the junior partner should select this particular moment to carry out his "instructions" was splendidly ironic, and it was a relief to slip away on any pretext. Steer meanwhile waited for her reappearance with exemplary patience. He had convinced himself that after a tussle he could win over Gertrude to undertake this audacious mission, but he had been surprised to find how

submissively "he had her in his pocket." And he rejoiced to think what a pretty stroke he was about to play on his crafty opponent.

"Hello! what's up?" he demanded, as she re-entered. Her face thoroughly frightened him.

"It will not be necessary for me to go to Mr. Forster," she replied. "I have the information you require."

Steer waited with twitching lips.

"The telephone," she proceeded, "was from my mother's brokers. There has been a heavy fall in the shares in the city, and the reason apparently is that legal proceedings are to be taken to contest the validity of the concession of the White Lead Syndicate."

"Eh! what?" Steer almost shouted. This was indeed a bolt from the blue.

"That's what the broker said," Gertrude said quietly. "The news had just been cabled over, and the shares are now quite unsalable."

Steer controlled himself with a tremendous effort. "Who's taking the proceedings?" he asked, in a voice hoarse with anger and excitement. "Has that come out too?"

Gertrude mentioned two names and watched him earnestly.

"Dummies," Steer ejaculated, "dummies, of course, men of straw put up by Forster." He seemed rather relieved. "Two can play at that game. If Forster's going to buy judges, so can we. We'll soon put this silly panic to right." He rubbed his fleshy hands and began to walk up and down.

"I forgot to say," Gertrude interposed, "that the proceedings are not to be taken in New York, but in the little South American republic where the concession lies."

Steer came to a dead halt. The tan in his cheeks was bleached to a sickly grey. An oath trickled from his cracked lips. He knew, if Gertrude did not, that the republic in question was the state in which Amalgamated

Aluminium and the Blue Paradise Mines also lay. In that cockpit of sub-tropical revolution and corruption, judges were to be bought, to put it bluntly, and doubtless by this time the conscience of every official, from the President who was a shareholder in Blue Paradise Diamonds, to the bar-keeper who gambled in Amalgamated Aluminium, was in the safe keeping of the man who controlled the two staple industries of the country. If that were really so, the concession to the White Lead Syndicate was not worth the paper on which it was written.

"Good Lord!" Steer faltered brokenly and dropped into a chair.

Gertrude waited with a pitiless calm till he had recovered himself a little. "Does this all mean," she asked, "that the game—your game and mine—is really up?"

"We'll fight him yet," he answered solemnly. "We'll fight him—fight him to his last dollar; oh, we're not knocked out yet, not by any means." He sprang to his feet and the words came thick and fast. "There are others besides my partners and me to whom the validity of the concession is vital. The syndicate was put on its feet—financed—to start with, by a New York bank; they have a mortgage on it, a mortgage for a quarter of a million, and if the concession is cancelled they'll lose every penny. They've been our friends all through and they'll see Dick Forster to hell or Jericho before they let him rob them of their money by his dirty, half-bred Spanish hirelings.

"What is the name of this bank?" Gertrude asked, and her heart was beating fast.

"The name won't tell *you* anything," he retorted with coarse scorn, "but it's called the London and New York Financial Corporation."

Gertrude look at him in silence.

"You're done," she pronounced slowly. "Yes, you're done, Mr. Steer. The game is really up."

"What——" he began and then he stopped.

"Oh! you fool, you fool!" she cried, her emotion bursting out in hot scorn. "Are you and your partners so ignorant or so incompetent as not to know that the London and New York Financial Corporation is only another name for Richard Forster? The man who has a mortgage on the White Lead Syndicate is Richard Forster, and without any judge he can just smash up your concern, when and how he pleases." She turned away, white to the lips, for at last she fully realised that her great plan had collapsed.

Steer was staring at her, dumb, paralysed, horror-stricken. Then he clutched at her arm. "How do you know this?" he cried savagely.

"He told me so himself"—she flung off his arm, as if it polluted her—"months ago."

"Ah!" the rage in his eyes and voice were making him inarticulate.

"Was it Forster also," he demanded in a hollow voice, "who told you that it was he who was really operating on the quiet against the White Lead Syndicate?"

"Yes, of course it was Mr. Forster."

"As a secret?"

"Yes."

"And you betrayed it?"

"To you, Mr. Steer."

He clutched his hands. "A woman," he muttered. "A woman. Bah! Dick Forster knew a woman would pass it on, and she did. And that's how he lured us into this damned trap. He lured us on to this mined ground, mined by him through you, miss, through you!" The rage and despair overmastered him. "You're in his pay," he cried suddenly. "Oh, I see it all now. I thought you were an honest woman, but by God! I know now what you are, you're——"

"You cur!" Gertrude had grasped his wrist. The anger in her figure and face and the icy dignity with

which she spoke cowed him, mad with rage and fear though he was.

"Leave the room at once," was her command. "Another word and I will ring the bell and have you put into the street. Go!" she pointed to the door.

Steer picked up his hat and tottered from her.

"Wait!" she suddenly commanded, and Steer found himself compelled to face her against his will. "I have one more piece of information to give you. The person who sold the shares in New York and broke the market was myself. And," the wrath and contempt in her voice were superb, "though I did it in pure ignorance of the effect it would produce and on the advice of my brokers, I am glad now, very glad. For your insults and your insolence to myself I am happy to think I need not trouble myself. No, I can leave you to the mercy of Mr. Forster. Go!"

Not till she heard the front door close and his hansom drive off did she move from the position she had taken up in front of the fireplace. And then she too tottered to a seat, and the self-command at last dissolved in hot tears of anger, mortification, and impotence. Under the marble copy of that glorious Victory with the breath of freedom in its wings and the triumph of faultless womanhood in its peerless draperies—the Victory, fit symbol of the strength and beauty of the serene realm of the spirit, she now sat shaken by her sobs, defeated and helpless. She had already forgotten Steer's outrageous words, his vile insinuations which a few minutes before had stirred a wrath and indignation that had robbed her of all her self-command. And had she struck him dead at her feet the blow would have been but a faint indication of the typhoon of passion that had throbbed in every fibre of her body. She was sobbing now from sheer physical weakness and exhaustion, and because she recognised in a torture of exquisite bitterness not merely the collapse of the plan on which her love and her future were

staked, but the penalties that failure brought with it. Steer's indictment was false, but it rested on facts more cruel to a girl, proud and jealous of her womanhood, than if it had been true. She had planned to make Dick the instrument of her ambition, yet from first to last she had been the tool, treated as a mere pawn of sex in the game of his life. She had betrayed his secrets, trafficked with his enemies, trailed herself in the mire, and he had recognised it from the first, and had then calmly reckoned on the fact, and used her simply for his own purposes. She had been no more than the blind servant of a man's will. The market had to be broken somehow in order to prepare for the *coup de grâce*, and she at his bidding had broken it.

And this was the man whom she in her vanity and ignorance had set out in alliance with Steer—Steer! she sobbed afresh at the very thought—to make dependent for money and a career on herself. From the first, Forster had worked with a success and completeness to have the White Lead Syndicate, if he required it, at his mercy. Link by link, never halting, never slackening, he had forged the wonderful chain by which, if and when he chose, he could either throttle it or fling it from him powerless to harm. His enemies had intervened, but they, poor fools, did not know that the ship was already on a lee-shore and the rocks were waiting them. Yes, Richard Forster now held the White Lead Syndicate in the hollow of his hand.

Gertrude, of course, was not aware of Mr. Bruce's real position, of the unconscious share of Dot and Jim and Sir Guy Lemare in the drama of which a mighty financial battle was the outward sign. She knew only that her own plan had collapsed with the collapse of the market in London and New York. What was she to do now? What indeed?

The paroxysm of passion and physical exhaustion had sobbed itself out. She rose and softly stole to her bed-

room. More than ever she loved this man. Great?—ah yes! he was far greater than she had thought; he could be made far greater than she had ever dreamed, and she who had been his instrument would now be so proud, so willing, to be his instrument for ever. Her love, her beauty, her brains, her wealth—all these he should have so gladly, so humbly offered, if only she could win that priceless devotion from a great man's strength and manhood for which a woman's soul and body cried out. Love as the architect of life; yes, love and love alone was the architect of a woman's life. Gertrude confessed it now, not sadly, not with the old touch of contempt for the weakness of her sex, but with a quickening thrill of pride, a joyous consciousness of the new future it promised.

Hopeless? was it hopeless? All the afternoon she debated it, dry-eyed, calmly and more calmly. The contract note first gave her a clue. She had sold out at the top price of an artificially inflated speculation and presently there would come a cheque for seventy thousand pounds. That was her profit for "breaking" the market, and she owed it to Dick—to Dick alone. It must be because he cared—cared for her!—and was ready to do his best to prevent her ruin. She remembered his eyes in the hall. Dick—she sprang to her feet, with a cry of passion in her heart—Dick could still be won.

At four o'clock she dressed, ordered the carriage, had a few minutes' conversation with her mother, and drove down to Waterloo. She was just in time. The special train with the American passengers steamed in as she hastened on to the platform, and yonder was a familiar figure stepping out.

"Gertrude!" Sir Guy Lemare exclaimed—"you have come to meet me! This is indeed kind of you."

"Well, I had nothing very particular to do," she answered, smiling, "and I have a message for you. Mamma —indeed both mamma and I sincerely hope that you will

come back in the carriage and spend your first week-end in London with us."

"Why, of course I will," he said, in his simple way. "Besides," he added, "I want particularly to talk to you."

"You have more news?" she asked carelessly.

His eyes grew stern. "I have come back," he said, "to stop this marriage—if it is not too late."

"No," she answered composedly, "I don't think it is too late."

While he busied himself with his luggage the poster of an evening newspaper caught her attention. "Sudden Death of a Prominent Financier" was splashed in capitals on the boards by the bookstall. In a minute she was reading eagerly. The financier was Steer. He had reached his office alive, but ten minutes after entering it he had died. A blood-vessel had burst in his brain. The paper was full of the White Lead Syndicate, of Steer and the dramatic fall in the shares. Gertrude crushed it up. Two vivid thoughts alone were flashing through her mind. Fate had mysteriously ordained that what had passed that morning in the drawing-room of a Mayfair flat should remain her secret; and that John P. Steer should not come up for judgment and mercy at any human tribunal.

"No," Gertrude repeated quietly as the carriage took Sir Guy and herself away, "I am sure it is not too late."

CHAPTER XX

LOVE, THE JUDGE

On the Monday morning following Sir Guy Lemare's sudden return from New York, Dick sat in the library at the Manor House, surrounded by papers, but though there was work of all kinds crying out to be done, he had for half an hour and more wholly neglected it.

True, the superhuman strain of the last few weeks had at last been lifted. The White Lead Syndicate, if he now chose, could be wiped out, its authors swept into a common ruin. Steer, his bitterest foe, had been removed from the battlefield before bankruptcy and moral degradation overtook him; but there remained Steer's allies, the men who, blindfolded, had aided him to seek for a complete revenge. They were equally his foes; they equally deserved, and should find, summary chastisement. Never again should they raise their heads against him. As they had sowed, so should they reap. That was the law of Nature, the justice of a world of men, and also the justice, if there was a justice, of the moral government of the universe.

Dick, however, was fully aware that punishment was not in his power to mete out or withhold as he thought fit. The White Lead Syndicate was only an incident, the central incident perhaps, in a colossal financial battle. Both sides had embarked all their resources in the fight; there was to be no quarter; Dick's enemies had planned to strip him of all that he possessed. To-day his victory meant that he must complete the work so effectively begun; he must crush his foes in the ruin that they had planned for him. To hold his hand now simply spelled, before long, the fate he had averted. No, he must go through with it to the bitter end—to emerge not merely a victor,

not merely far richer, far more powerful than when at Oban he had cast the dice and abided by the cast, but a man who was obliged to wreak his revenge to the uttermost farthing. That, too, was the law of Nature, the justice of the world of men, the justice of the moral government of the universe.

Dick neither questioned the fact nor regretted the duty it imposed. In the centres of finance remorseless observers probably had guessed whose was the masked brain and hidden hand which had planned and executed so masterly a campaign, so condign and dramatic a retribution. Once the victory was complete and the last account settled, Richard Forster would have taken his seat amongst the mighty half-dozen Olympians on whose policy and resources the vast and daily business of two continents is content to rest in security and peace. Henceforward, as an Immortal, he would neither need to speculate nor to fight; his task and his duty would be to watch the battles of the mortal Titans, and to govern in the interests of the millions, poor and rich alike, who earn their bread in the marts of the world by the sweat of their brow. But Dick to-day felt neither pride nor exaltation. He did not flatter himself that his brains, skill and experience, his matchless physique alone had snatched triumph from apparent disaster. He had won because he had done his best, and—profound and comforting thought—because he had right on his side. There was something, after all, in the moral government of the universe: and this morning he was more than vaguely conscious that the veiled spiritual forces of a mysterious and inscrutable world fought on the side of brains and skill battling against the odds for the right. Why this was so he neither cared to ask nor could answer if he had asked it; he was content to accept the result with a new-born humility that would have astonished the men who regarded him the unbeaten financier, the incarnation of the supremacy of the purely human over the superstitions and shibboleths of the weak, who attributed the course

of the world's affairs to the silent strength of moral principles that every day's events conclusively refuted. Blessed are the strong, for they shall prey on the weak—that had been the cardinal tenet of Dick's creed for many years, accepted with reluctance but established by facts. It was his creed no longer. It was not true, simply not true, and therefore repellent. Henceforth he rejected it absolutely. But if he owed the change—the loss of the old, the need for the new faith—to anyone, he owed it to Dot—yes, to Dot. When his feet were on the neck of the vanquished, he had pledged himself to listen to the message of her rose, and the message was already here. No longer necessary to listen, it was a pleasure and a duty to obey. For Dick, sitting in the library this Monday morning, felt, above all, a profound, a superb sense of relief. He need never tell Dot the truth. Dot need never know now the history, the squalid and tragic misery and shame, that lay behind the battle of the White Lead Syndicate. He had taken a great, a cruel risk in refusing to embitter Dot's life with the knowledge of the truth—the risk of ruining her life as well as his own; but he had been abundantly justified by the event. She and he could now commence the new life without so much as a shadow to mar the felicity to come. And Dot, who had already taught him so much, should henceforth teach him much more, should help him to reconstruct a more satisfying creed of life, to realise the dim aspirations that had first dawned on a mind that sought the truth in the moonlit square of the Bodleian at Oxford.

In a few weeks the White Lead Syndicate would be an affair of history, have glided into the mist of the old unhappy far-off things, the battles of long ago. The era of finance was closed. On his honeymoon, in concert with Dot's sympathy and help, should begin the new career in which he and she would learn together how to employ his vast wealth in the service of his country and mankind. Last night, under the trees by the rustling banks of the

lake, he had sketched to the girl, clinging to his arm, the future as he dreamed it, a future in which she was to be the dominating element, and he recalled the noble happiness that had purified and beautified her trusting eyes. Happy?—thank God she was happy and innocent! and he was happy too. And this morning, for the first time, he began to be aware that this new happiness was strangely bound up with a woman's partnership in it. Was this the beginning of real love for him? Could it be that the impossible had happened? that into his feeling for Dot there was creeping that element of passion without which there can, in the mystery of sex, be no love? He pushed the disquieting thought away with a feverish indignation. Its presence threatened his scheme of life as he had planned it; it menaced that self-mastery which his career had been spent in acquiring, and was the one quality in his character of which he was genuinely proud. Till to-day the winds that blew in the dreamland of the kingdom of the spirit within had whispered their message of comfort, of strength, of undying aspiration, for his ears alone. The strong man was the man who had the courage to stand most by himself. It could not, must not be that the whisper of those siren voices should only be heard by another's permission; that the keys of the doors into the kingdom of the spirit should pass against his will into another, and that a woman's keeping, and that even if she surrendered them freely because she loved him, his love for her in return alone could unseal his ears, once so free, to those voices, because love had made her their sole interpreter.

Dick had recourse to his work and forgot all but finance. A whine at the garden window, two flops, and Savvy and Romola had jumped in from the terrace. Two barks of well-bred remonstrance. Four ears were pricked up, four amber eyes were very bright. "We are waiting," said those ears and eyes, "and the sunlight is on the dew on the grass and"—two more barks, sharper this time—"be-

cause, really, you are not only rude but tiresome." But Dick paid no heed. Savvy gravely consulted Romola. The lady threw up her nose and scrambled out as she had entered, and of course Savvy followed, with a tail bristling with disappointment.

"Dick!"

Romola and Savvy had returned, and now, ready to forgive, stood on either side of Dot, swinging her hat.

"Dick!"

The amber eyes glanced from the apple in her hand to the absorbed figure at the desk. That apple, from the best tree, was for the rude man. The soil of the orchard on their paws was also on their mistress's skirt. All that was best now went to this rude man, and sometimes so terribly rude he was, he did not even seem to know it. Foolish fellow!

"Dick!"

"Run away, dear child, I am very busy." The pen travelled rapidly over the paper.

"But you promised to walk with me across the park to meet Violet."

"Quite impossible." He did not put the pen down. "I'm up to the crown in work."

Romola and Savvy barked impatiently. Dot put the apple down on the window-sill and walked slowly towards the large roll-top desk. Dick had resumed his writing.

"Yesterday," she said, "you found time to interrupt your business to walk with Kitty. Surely you can do for me what——"

He wheeled his chair round. "Mrs. Barclay," he interrupted quietly, "was part of the business. I had several important matters to discuss with her. Don't be unreasonable, Dot."

"But I can have important business too." She came up behind his chair. "Surely if you can talk business with Kitty you can——"

"Dot!" he said, with a touch of pained surprise, "this

is really unreasonable. I am going to London in an hour, as you know. It is quite impossible for me to keep my promise. You must leave me, my dear," he added.

"Dick," she pleaded, and the tears were not far away, "I had looked forward to this walk so much. Why must you——?"

The door had opened. Edward Bruce had appeared. "Charming," he said, with a feeble effort at gaiety, "a charming idyll. I don't like to disturb you, but I must—I am afraid I must." He closed the door gently. "Business, business. You must both let me interrupt you, for what I have to say concerns you both."

"It couldn't concern me alone, could it, Uncle Edward?"

Dick began to fold up his papers. He had a shrewd suspicion as to what was coming, and he could not decide whether it should come now or not at all. For though Bruce had said very little, and Dick absolutely nothing, of the White Lead Syndicate, the whole household was aware that grave complications had arisen. Since Sunday morning they were bitten deep in the master's anxious eyes, in the paleness of his cheeks and the unusual depression of his manner.

"Yes, my dear Dot," Bruce began, taking a seat, "I am obliged to ask you to give me your serious attention."

The girl swung herself idly on to the table, where her feet brushed the noses of Savvy and Romola lying on the oak floor. "Have an apple, Uncle Edward?" she questioned. "No? Then, Dick, share mine, and I'll have first bite to make it sweet."

"Yes, tempting Eve!" He took it, smiling.

"Sinful old Adam!" she retorted under her breath, "cajoled as usual by a weak, interfering woman from the best motives," she threw up her head, "and with disastrous results to follow."

"You must be serious, my dear," Bruce remonstrated gravely; "this is not a jesting affair by any means." He

cleared his throat. "You are aware that Dick proposes to settle on you, his future bride, a quarter of a million——"

"Need we go into that now, Bruce?" Forster interrupted. "We can discuss these tiresome affairs as we travel together in the train."

"No, I wish Dot fully to understand the position. Are you listening, my dear?"

She nodded.

"In return," Bruce resumed, "my niece's share in the settlement was to be the fifty thousand pounds which she inherited from her mother."

"Jim has the same, hasn't he—fifty thousand pounds?" Dot interposed simply. "You are trustee for us both, Uncle Edward, you and Guy?"

"Ye-es; I am coming to that." Forster rose, strolled carelessly over to the fireplace and lit a cigarette. "But the plain truth, my dear child, is that your fifty thousand pounds no longer exist."

A howl from both dogs. Dot had slipped from the table on to their paws and was staring at her uncle in blank astonishment.

"Some months ago," he proceeded, speaking with some difficulty, "acting on excellent advice and careful inquiry, I invested all your money and Jim's in a most promising commercial concern, the White Lead Syndicate. By means you would not understand, my dear, unscrupulous financiers—in fact, the syndicate has been wrecked, and unless a miracle intervenes——"

"Or a woman," Dick remarked from the fireplace, "which is the same thing, is it not, Dot?"

"Richard!" Bruce turned on him, "your levity is most ill-judged. My dear, I repeat that the syndicate in which all your money was invested has been wrecked. I am going to town this morning on a forlorn hope, to see if anything can be done. But I fear the worst—the worst. We must face the facts. In a few days you, I regret to

say, will probably, perhaps certainly be, like Jim and myself, a pauper."

"Uncle Edward!"

"I am an honourable man," Bruce proceeded, after a helpless glance at Dick, who was smoking in silence. "I acted on the best advice, but I have been cheated and ruined."

"Then," Dot faltered, "you too have lost all your money?"

"Yes."

"And," she burst out with a cry of pain, "will Jim have to sell the manor, his manor—this house where——"

"Beggars," Bruce said bitterly, "can't be choosers, my dear Dot. The manor will have to be sold perhaps, certainly let. We shall no longer be able to live here."

Her fingers twisted in pain. "Ah," she murmured, with a dry sob, "those men on the Stock Exchange, those wicked men!"

"Yes," Bruce rose, anger and despair in his tones, "you are right, my dear child. It is those wicked men on the Stock Exchange—the gamblers for wealth who think only of themselves. One man in particular is responsible for this, one heartless scoundrel. Ah, if I only knew who——"

Forster stepped forward. "Don't be distressed, Dot," he said. "If the manor has to be sold, the purchaser is already here, and it will be for you to say who shall live in it."

"Dick," she had cried, "my generous Dick!" Her tears were wetting his shoulder. "Oh, how can I pay you——"

"By becoming my wife." He took her hands. "Dear child, you will be all the more precious to me if you bring as your dowry only your sweet innocent self." He turned to the unhappy man to whom his words had brought a ray of hope. "Mr. Bruce, you have my full sympathy. We can all make errors of judgment. We are all liable to be cheated. But we need not discuss this further now,

I think. What has unfortunately happened, I do assure you, makes no difference at all to the position, so far as I am concerned. Quite the contrary. Dot," he laid a hand on her hair, "is mine to keep and guard, and she alone can alter what has been settled between us."

"My dear Dick!" Edward Bruce drew himself up, "I thank you, though I feel that you have only done, of course, what an honourable man in your position would do. I felt sure the unfortunate error of judgment—it is scarcely that—of which I have been guilty—guilty is an absurdly strong word—could make no difference. I must face the consequences for myself as best I may, but I have done my duty in wasting no time by laying the facts before Dot, and doubtless," he waved his hand with a flash of the old geniality, "we shall be able to make by and by a satisfactory arrangement."

Dot listened in painful silence. Dick had no intention of releasing Edward Bruce yet from the healthy lessons his folly entailed. But he was disagreeably surprised that the offender took so lightly the very grave position in which he really stood.

"Well, well," Bruce continued, his confidence growing as Dick abstained from all comment, "we can talk of it as you say, in the train, and as everything is so uncertain still, things may, you know, take a favourable turn. I fancy we had perhaps better keep our knowledge to ourselves for the present. Don't, my dear Dot, don't mention the matter to Jim or your aunt, until I am back again to-morrow evening." He waved a gay hand from the door at the pair. "A charming idyll—perfectly charming, and the dogs just the right colour to make the picture faultless."

Dot turned passionately to her betrothed. "Dick," she cried in a low voice, "my noble, unselfish Dick! I was a little beast to you this morning. Can you, will you forgive me?"

"I have nothing to forgive. I only remember that you

have promised to share my life. Money, my dear child, is what you and I must always banish from our thoughts. Whether you are rich or poor makes no difference, and I should like to think that you will not love me less because I am rich."

"I would marry you to-morrow," she cried, "even if you hadn't a sixpence. But I wish——"

"No, don't wish. Let us be happy with things as they are."

There was a pause.

"Do you think Uncle Edward is to blame?" she asked suddenly.

"Well, you see, your uncle is at a great disadvantage. He is an amateur, and amateurs don't really stand much chance with the trained men of business—the experts," he smiled slyly.

"Like you?"

"Yes, the wicked financiers like me, who are so busy making money that they have no time even to keep their promises about walks across the park."

She continued to reflect.

"Uncle Edward ought not to have put my money into the White Lead Syndicate," she pronounced, with a decision that surprised him. "I heard Violet's husband say the other day it was a rotten concern from the start." He moved uneasily and began to study her face with a touch of anxiety. "Why didn't you stop him, Dick?"

"It was too late. He had done it before I knew him; and besides, your uncle thought he knew best."

"It is Jim I'm troubled about," she said, after another pause. "I have you, and you are rich. But Jim—oh, it's hateful, hateful!"

"My dear, by and by you and I must put our wise heads together about Jim. Perhaps when you are married you will be so rich that you will be able to make him a present all from yourself. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

"Jim wouldn't take your money," she affirmed proudly but sadly, "and he would be right."

"When we are married," he corrected gently, "it won't be my money, Dot. It will be yours. What is mine is yours, and yours is mine."

"Sweetheart!" She nestled beside him. "Why, you are wearing a faded rose," she cried, "and I never noticed it. I do believe it is the very rose I once gave you in the city."

"Yes." He took her cheeks between his hands. "I was in great trouble that day, but the message your rose whispered to me is a message I never wish to forget. So I keep it and it makes the bitter things of life sweet."

"It will have a new message after this morning," she answered simply—"a message of gratitude as well as of love."

There was another pause. But Dot's next remark startled him.

"Trustees are put in prison, aren't they," she asked, "if they lose the money of their wards? Will Uncle Edward have to go to prison?"

"My dear, you may be quite sure that if I can prevent it your uncle will not go to prison."

"I don't want him to go to prison," she said slowly, "but he ought to be punished in some way. He has done wrong, a great wrong, to Aunt Elsa, to Jim, and to me."

"Ah, Dot, we don't know his temptations——"

"But surely," she interrupted with a flash, "you don't believe that temptation can alter what a man or a woman does. A thing must be either right or wrong in itself. Dick," she confronted him, "you can't think that the motive can turn wrong into right—that you may do wrong because you are tempted to believe that it will be right in the end."

"Little philosopher, I only meant that until we know all the circumstances we ought not to judge your uncle."

"I am sorry, but I cannot think so," she replied un-

flinchingly. "Uncle Edward has confessed to losing Jim's money and mine. Mother left it to him as a sacred trust. I don't care a pin about the money. It's not the money that makes it wrong. But Uncle Edward has betrayed his trust. That is what hurts me, hurts me here"—she laid her hand on her heart—"hurts me more than I can say."

"And is it no punishment to him that he should have to confess this to you"—Dick found himself in the disagreeable position of having to defend the gambler—"that he should perhaps be to-day a beggar? Be just, Dot, be just."

"I want to be just. But my conscience tells me that Uncle Edward has done wrong, and I cannot go against it." She walked away sadly. "I can never," she murmured to Savvy and Romola, who had leaped up on the window-seat beside her, "I can never again have the old feeling for Uncle Edward. Don't think me cruel, Dick, but I can't. I simply can't pretend to say that when one I love does wrong it makes no difference."

The gong sounded in the hall, announcing that the carriage was at the door. As he gathered up his papers Dot was thoughtfully stroking Romola's paws in her lap.

"A woman," she whispered, half to herself, with a touch of bitterness, "perhaps feels about these things differently from a man. But"—she threw up her head—"I don't want to change my feelings. If I did not believe that right and wrong are right and wrong in themselves, and that love and justice and truth, all the noble and eternal things of life, depend on that one simple law of God which conscience alone can and will interpret for us without fail, I could not be happy. But it does not matter whether I think so or not; God's laws are there in the world all the time. You and I, Dick, cannot alter them."

As she put Romola gently down and crossed the room to bid him good-bye there was a light in her eyes and face, the serene light of that high and bracing seriousness which

draws its strength to illuminate from the spiritual within, and breathes perhaps the subtlest and most difficult of all truths—that the deeper love is, so is it blended beyond all analysis with the sublime spirit of justice, the justice that by judging declares the divine origin of both. Dot had not needed the poetry of the *Divina Commedia* to teach her this; nor had she bought the lesson, as Dante did, with a great price. With her it was an elemental instinct without which all the feelings which made her so intensely happy in the great blessings love had given her were meaningless and worthless.

She kissed Dick very quietly, and they parted. But as he crossed the threshold she stretched her arms with a sudden passionate appeal for help and protection. "My dear, my dear," she whispered, as she clasped him to her breast, "tell me I am right, tell me I am right. Tell me that nothing can separate us now."

"No, Dot," he answered, with profound conviction, "no one but yourself can part us now."

He paused to look back. Never did he forget the light in her eyes as she stood in a ray of the October sun, a slim, girlish figure, so white and pure against the dark shadows of the panelled room. And all the way in the train her words were ringing in his ears. They had indeed given him much more to think of than the criminal folly of Edward Bruce or the conspiracy of his financial foes.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GUARDIAN'S RETURN

Dot was not left long to her thoughts. The carriage wheels had scarcely ceased to sound on the gravel when the dogs were barking a frantic welcome, and leaped through the window because they recognised a familiar step. Dot suddenly remembered that she was expecting Violet and she darted after them to find herself grasped by the arm, and kissed as she tumbled on to the terrace.

"There, Vi," Jim was saying, "there's the modern young woman for you if you like. Keeps you and me kicking our heels a cool half-hour at the station, and then scandalises poor old Henderson, by forgetting she has a skirt on. Dorothy"—he gently mimicked his aunt's tones, "I really am ashamed of you."

"Jim!" Dot cried, "what are you doing here?"

"Mayn't a fellow occasionally come and see his own house?" he retorted.

Dot was eyeing her brother almost with pain.

"Now what have I done that I should be stared at as if I were an interloper?" he went on genially. "I would have you to know that I have as much right to climb in at this window as you have to climb out. Ta! ta!" He swung himself lightly in and disappeared.

Dot turned and mechanically kissed Violet Edwardes.

"What is the matter?" Violet asked, with no little concern. "You looked at Jim as if he was a ghost. I can assure you he is real flesh and blood. Dear Jim! nothing seems to quench his spirits. But are you not well, dear?"

"I am perfectly well," she answered, rather coldly, "I was surprised to see Jim, that was all." How could she

explain that her brother's unexpected appearance in the house that he could not know was no longer his, had smitten her with a cruel faintness? "Let us go down to the lake and talk," she added, forcing herself to speak. She whistled to the dogs. "And your husband, Vi—where is he?"

"He is detained in town. Mr. Forster will, I believe, bring him to-night."

The two strolled slowly past the cedar, the maple, and the mulberry—three of the glories of the Manor House lawn—towards the broad expanse of water, fringed on its further bank by alders and hazel melting into a tangled slope of bramble and bracken, burnished to the old-gold of autumn by the October sun. Violet Edwardes placed her arm affectionately round her girl-friend's waist, and covertly scrutinised her face. No one would have called her a pretty woman, but in her figure and her features, particularly in her grey eyes and delicately-cut lips, there lay that refined and soothing restfulness which is more than a compensation for the absence of mere prettiness.

"You are happy, really happy?" she questioned anxiously.

Dot picked a pebble and threw it into the water. "Yes," she answered, without taking her eyes away from the widening circles rippling out to the lilies and the green sword-flags of the island. "I am very happy. I believe I am so utterly selfish in my happiness that some day I shall have to pay for it."

Mrs. Edwardes reflected on this answer. "If I didn't know you as well as I know myself," she remarked, "I should say you were telling me what you think you are expected to say. What is the trouble, dear child?"

"Child!"—Dot turned with an impatient gesture. "I am not a child, Violet; I am as much a woman as you are."

The other laughed. "Be it so," she said; "but women

can have more trouble than children. Come, confess, confess."

But Dot was silent.

"It has something to do with Jim," Violet boldly continued.

"I can't tell you yet, Vi," Dot began and stopped. "But you are quite right. It is Jim." She paused again. "Oh, I hate myself," she cried in a low voice. "That I should be so happy and Jim——" She wrung her hands.

"Jim seems very pleased with his lot," Mrs. Edwardes observed.

"You can't understand and I can't tell you," was the reply. "But would you not be unhappy if you knew that your brother could not marry the woman whom he loved and who, you were quite sure, loved him, when you yourself have learned what love can be both for a man and a woman?"

Dot's speech was quite unintelligible; women-friends are perhaps accustomed to that. "And who is the girl?" she inquired gently. "May I not know that?"

"It is Kitty, of course!"

"Kitty?" she queried, as carelessly as she could,—"Mrs. Barclay?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Edwardes waited till she was quite sure her voice was under control. "And why should Jim not marry Mrs. Barclay?" she asked.

"You don't approve of her?" Dot suddenly demanded with fierce irrelevance.

"I? My dear ch——" She corrected herself with a conventional laugh. "My dear woman, I have seen her perhaps three times. I simply don't know her." In her flurry she made a mistake. "Arthur knows her much better than I do."

Dot was looking at her with keen surprise. "Your husband knows Kitty?" she questioned.

Violet registered a mental note to warn her husband to

be careful. "Arthur knew Mrs. Barclay, I believe, some years ago in New York, when he was working with Mr. Forster."

"How interesting!" Dot exclaimed, much pleased. "They will enjoy meeting again."

Mrs. Edwardes had her own thoughts about this and she did not express them. "Why, there is Jim," she was relieved to be able to observe. "See, he is waving to us."

Savvy and Romola had already deserted them to run a race to the terrace where Jim stood signalling.

"Aunt Elsa," he said gravely, "wants you both. She has postponed fainting till you arrive, so you had better hurry up."

"You are not to scream, Dot," Jim went on, as he led the way to the large drawing-room. "I have already screamed both for you and Violet, and Aunt Elsa says if there is to be any more required she will do it herself. Henderson," he added, with a wink, "has already reduced Sally the scullery-maid to tears. The minx!"—he was imitating the lean and funereal butler—"'the second telegraph boy in a week. I h'always did say as those shrubberies was a-made for the purpose.'"

"Take those dogs out," Mrs. Ottoway commanded, as she kissed Violet. "I have enough on my nerves already."

Jim rang the bell. "Henderson," he said, without moving a muscle, "let Romola and Savonarola loose in the shrubberies until Mrs. Ottoway decides whether there is an answer for the telegraph boy, and be sure he brushes his boots when he leaves."

Romola and Savvy's howls as they were dragged away seemed to give Henderson a melancholy satisfaction. Mrs. Ottoway waited till the last howl was stifled in the laurels.

"What did I say about dreaming about the Royal family?" she began at last. "Guy has just telegraphed that we may expect him in an hour."

"Guy!" both Dot and Violet cried—"Guy coming!"

Mrs. Ottoway opened the yellow envelope, found her spectacles and read aloud—

"Have chucked New Guinea for the present. Arrived in London Saturday. Will come this morning to stay."

"Chucked!" she protested. "I have heard of chucking chins before——"

"So has the telegraph boy," Jim murmured.

"But never of chucking New Guinea. What can he mean?" She looked round her. "It must be a misprint" —they were all laughing—"or whatever the word for mistakes in telegrams is. James, you can dismiss that boy. As Guy is so afraid of telling us where he is staying, it is useless to ask him to postpone his visit."

"It is curious," Violet mused, for Dot was too troubled by the thought of what her guardian would find at home to offer any remarks, "why Guy should wish to come to the wedding after all."

"It is much more curious," Mrs. Ottoway pronounced severely, "that he should ever have proposed to stay away; but Guy has always considered cannibals and heathen of more importance than his relations: not indeed that he has ever taken any trouble about any of his duties. He was perfectly content to leave all our business to my brother, who, if I am any judge, is singularly incompetent. But when a man has already given his present, as Guy has, it is quite unnecessary for him to come to the wedding—unnecessary and inconsiderate. I shall put him in one of the attics."

Jim had returned with a time-table. "It must be the 12.50," he said. "Come along, Dot, we'll drive and meet him. I have something exciting to tell you."

In three-quarters of an hour they had brought Sir Guy Lemare to the Manor and had already exhausted his conversation. Both Jim and Dot were disappointed and rather troubled by the unusual gravity of his manner. Not

that he had not expressed in his simple, somewhat priggish way great satisfaction at seeing them both again. But he had clearly been upset by their uncle's unexpected absence; and the reasons he had offered for his sudden change of plan were, as Mrs. Ottoway put it to Violet, "inadequate and untrue, not to say absurd." He was ill at ease and moody all through lunch, took no interest whatever in the conversation which naturally ran on the wedding, and very nearly reduced Dot, who was carrying her burden as bravely as she could, to tears by curtly declining to look at the presents. A vague sense of trouble, undefined yet, seemed to stalk unresisted through the house, a menacing and sinister ghost from the chambers of the past, to stand behind the chairs at the table and to point warning fingers at each member of the party in turn. Violet found herself shivering. These friends of hers to-day, when they thought they were unobserved, were looking at each other with a stern sadness that chilled her blood. Even Jim had changed. She detected new lines round his mouth, and a relentless purpose in his eyes that was both obstinate and perplexing. When Dot finally slipped away to her own room, and Guy announced he was going to unpack, and Jim went off to smoke without inviting her, she was glad to call for Romola and Savonarola to walk in their cheering company in search of rabbits in the park. Their eyes at least were bright and they saw no ghosts in the sunlight on the bracken.

Guy, perhaps, was really the most unhappy of them all. On the steamer and at the flat in Mayfair it had appeared an easy thing to journey down to the Manor House, define his ultimatum and break off the marriage. Forster he was ready to reckon with; but he had forgotten Dot. She was no longer the child he had last seen two years ago. She was a woman now, and the misgiving had been sharp and clear when he caught sight of her on the platform. Was he prepared to break her heart? Guy argued the question at the window of his room looking out on the garden

that he knew so well. But his duty was clear, and he must not shrink from a duty because it was disagreeable. And then the word duty pricked him with remorse. After all, if he had only done his duty, if he had stayed at home, this marriage would never have been settled. Bruce's absence had completely upset his plans. He had intended to lay what he had discovered at once before his ward's uncle, and together, before Forster could intervene, prepare Dot's mind for what must be For this was what Gertrude had persuaded him to do.

Gertrude indeed had determined, above all, that neither Dick nor Dot should have any reason to infer that Guy's actions were engineered by herself. She had, therefore, after mature consideration, abstained from giving him any further information. She had not even let him know that the Kitty Barclay who was Dot's friend was the Kitty Hennessy whom he had last met as Kitty Wilson. Guy, in any case, Gertrude felt, could not now blurt out, as a stupid and direct man would be sure to do, that he had her authority for this or that statement. To him she intended to appear, and she succeeded, as ignorant as everyone else, for Gertrude saw that the truth must be told now, and it suited her purpose that it should dribble out by degrees. It would be none the less effective by leaking out in instalments. Two things alone had she delicately hinted: the idea that Edward Bruce had suffered some financial loss through the White Lead Syndicate, and the suggestion that it would be fatal for Guy to go direct to Dot herself. For Gertrude feared that Dot might win her uncle over to her side; she had accurately gauged his easy temper and lax standards; and equally with Guy she was determined that the marriage must be prevented. Above all, Dick was to have no cause of resentment against herself.

Guy appreciated the wisdom of these hints when offered, and the proud independence he was astonished to detect beneath Dot's girlish charm confirmed him in his resolu-

tion to wait. Neither Jim nor she were as pliable as he had imagined. The pheasants were ready to be shot as soon as the coverts were a little bared, yet Jim, to whom shooting had been his life, had not even fired a gun at a partridge, and the Manor partridge drives were famous. Most of September he had actually preferred to work ten hours a day in a London office. A strange lad indeed! And Dot the child, too, now moved about the house with the calm radiance of a great happiness that not even momentary trouble could quench in her eyes, as if some mysterious power had brought her suddenly to be mistress of herself and of her fate. And she, this pearl of girls, was to be Forster's prize. Forster!

Yes, Lemare was seriously troubled. His conscience was uneasy, and he had always prided himself on his inflexible obedience to conscience, to the duty of his class, on his difference from so many other men with his opportunities and his temptations. Neither women nor money had deflected him from the straight and narrow way. He had faithfully observed the requirements of the moral law.

He could lay his hand on his heart—he had laid it from time to time in the past—and say, all these things he had kept from his youth upwards. But it dawned on him now that conscience, the conscience of a gentleman, was an imperfect organ; that duties may be neglected as well as strictly performed. And unquestionably his duty as trustee he had neglected. Some stray remarks by Mrs. Ottoway, an ominous hint from the funereal Henderson, the newspaper in the train, a careless criticism of Violet's, took his mind back to Gertrude's casual reference to the affairs of the White Lead Syndicate. Could it be that Edward Bruce had been making a fool of himself in the Stock Exchange?

Well, that and many other things could only be learned when Bruce returned to-morrow. Perhaps it would be better to return to London at once and have it out with

Bruce and Forster together. He played with the idea, and then his eye caught sight of Jim strolling across the lawn, pipe in mouth. He called to him, then hurried downstairs.

Jim was more than ready for a chat. "The fact is, old chap," he said, "I have something serious to say." They walked together towards the piazza summer-house, whose pillared columns and marble goddess on a pedestal in the centre of the semicircular wall suggested the days when Hanover and Stuart were terms of real meaning to Georgian England. "I am going to let you into a serious secret," Jim remarked, as they sat down.

Lemare could not restrain a start. "Serious secret," he repeated nervously. "Er—you haven't heard anything, have you?"

Jim inspected him narrowly. "Heard anything? what do you mean, Guy?"

"Nothing, nothing. You spoke so gravely I thought—yes, what is this serious secret?"

"I am in love."

Lemare laughed, much relieved. "Well, my dear boy, who is the latest charmer?"

Jim's lips curved with decision. "I am not joking," he said. "This is not one of the old idiotic fancies. It is the real thing." He paused. "The lady is Mrs. Barclay."

Guy reflected. "Ah," he remarked presently, "Dot's friend, the lady whom she wrote about so often in her letters. She is a widow, is she not?"

"Yes. She is two or three years older than I am. And I love her," he added simply.

"Have you told her so? have you asked her to marry you?" Lemare questioned.

"No. The time has not yet come for that."

Guy meditated with some surprise on the determination in his voice. "Have you spoken of this to anybody else?" was his next question.

"I have told Dot. She fully approves. Mrs. Barclay is, after Violet, her greatest friend."

"Dot approves," Guy repeated. "That says a great deal for Mrs. Barclay. What about your uncle and aunt?"

"Uncle Edward has been so busy with money matters of late"—Guy winced—"that I have not bothered him. But I have no reason to suppose that he would disapprove. He is, I am sure, very fond of Mrs. Barclay: he is always asking her down here."

"And your aunt?"

Jim faced him. "Aunt Elsa's views about women are neither mine nor Dot's," he answered quickly. "But if she disapproved of Mrs. Barclay you may be quite sure that she would have prevented Dot from making her her friend. All the same, I am not going to take Aunt Elsa into my confidence until it is necessary. I intend to choose my own wife."

Lemare fidgeted with his signet ring. "This is a serious matter, Jim," he said, "and I am glad to see that you have evidently considered it seriously. I candidly confess at once that a widow is not what we all expected you to select. You will understand, of course, I make no reflection whatever on Mrs. Barclay. That she is a friend of Dot's—a dear and intimate friend—is, in my opinion, most convincing testimony in her favour. But you are a young man; you will be a leading figure in the county and——"

Jim had cut him short. "Love, Guy," he said, "is the only thing that really matters. Let us talk about it without bringing my place in the county into it. You may be quite sure that Mrs. Barclay will not marry me because," a tinge of bitterness stole into his tones, "twelve months from to-day the county supposes I shall be master here."

"Supposes," Guy took him up. "Why, of course you will be master here. Your father's will——"

"We need not go into that," and Guy, somewhat aston-

ished, obeyed. There was a moment's silence. "There is one thing," Jim remarked, "I ought to tell you, I am not sure Dick quite approves."

"Dick? oh, Forster?" Guy stiffened. "What has he to do with it?"

"Well, you see, Dick is a masterful chap, and very ambitious. I fancy he has other views for me. He will be my brother-in-law, probably a peer some day if he chooses, and——"

"Both you and I," Lemare interrupted drily, "are not obliged as yet to do exactly what Forster commands. Forster is not your guardian." Guy's voice hardened as he went on. "If you and Mrs. Barclay really love one another, he will have no right to interfere, and you may rely on my support to prevent his interference, if necessary."

"Thank you, Guy, thank you very much." Jim placed an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "I am not afraid of Dick's interfering with me. But he might prejudice her against me. I only wish a fair field, an honest chance. That is why I have come to you and told you everything. I want you to help me—to be on my side. I can't say more than that I love her, and I believe that she loves me. She already is to me what no other woman ever can be. She must be my wife."

The simple words spoken with the strong emotion that can ring so true carried conviction. Guy knew enough of love, of what one woman can be to a man's life, both to understand and to sympathise.

"Very well, my dear boy," he said warmly, "you know I only desire your happiness; your confidence is not misplaced. If I can help you I will. There is my hand on it."

The echoes of the gong were wafted from the hall. Guy slipped his arm into Jim's and they strolled in the direction of the drawing-room.

"Tell me," Lemare questioned suddenly. "Some re-

marks of your aunt's have rather troubled me. Has your uncle been speculating?"

Jim's eyes ran over the familiar lines of the beautiful old house and the garden, as if they were concerned with the question. "Uncle Edward," he replied, "doesn't take me into his confidence in his money affairs. But I am afraid he has been investing in the White Lead Syndicate, and that he is likely to lose it all." The answer might convey all that the speaker knew, or it might not, and an inspection of Jim's face did not confirm or deny either alternative. Further questions were cut short by Dot's appearance. She ran down the lawn to meet them.

"Dick is detained in town," she announced. "He will not be here till to-morrow, and he doesn't say when he will come, probably with Uncle Edward in the evening, I should think."

Lemare found himself expressing a regret that he did not feel. It was much better that Forster and he should not meet until he could have a talk with Bruce.

"I shan't tell him," Dot went on, "that you are here, Guy. It will be a delightful surprise for him, and for Uncle Edward."

He nodded. This, also, was excellent. The three walked on together. Jim whispered to his sister, who broke into a low cry of pleasure.

"Oh, Guy, I am so glad," she said, "that Jim has told you. And I knew you would help. So that was what you two were plotting in the summer-house, all this time. And"—she took his arm slyly—"one good turn deserves another. Jim and I will help you, perhaps, some day, won't we, Jim?"

Guy reddened. "I shall need all your help," he replied rather sadly. Sunday in the flat at Mayfair had both encouraged and depressed him.

Dot had recovered her spirits. "There is luck coming," she whispered. "It's not a long step from being a bridesmaid to being a bride. Gertrude"—she took his hand—

"shall relent, and Jim perhaps will be able to get Kitty——"

"Kitty?" Lemare had stopped dead.

"That is her name, of course. You don't mean to say that foolish boy has talked to you all the afternoon and never told you her Christian name. Kitty Barclay"—Dot laughed gaily.

Kitty! Sir Guy Lemare had shivered all over. But the addition of Barclay reassured him. Of course there were hundreds of women called Kitty.

"I say, old chap," Jim interposed, "for a famous traveller I must say you are very jumpy. Is that the way you behave when a tiger suddenly walks into your path? If so, don't ask me to go shooting with you on foot, that's all."

"You will be calling her Kitty yourself before long," Dot chimed in.

Lemare laughed rather forcedly. "I was thinking of someone else," he said hurriedly. They walked on. "By the way, you haven't a photograph of your Kitty, have you?"

"No," Dot answered regretfully. "She won't be photographed, and it is such a shame, for she is so lovely—lovelier," she added teasingly, "much lovelier than Gertrude." Kitty, poor soul, knew better than to give photographs of herself to the wards of Sir Guy Lemare.

"Anyway," Jim remarked, "you will see her to-morrow and can compare her with Gertrude if you wish. They are both coming to stay, you know, till Dot is safely married."

Both Dot and Jim noticed the constraint of his manner with astonishment. Why did Guy always wince now when Dot's marriage was mentioned?

"Another surprise," Lemare commented, with a laugh that was strangely grim—"another surprise for me, and perhaps for Kitty too."

CHAPTER XXII

AN ARMED TRUCE

CHANCE that had already so innocently conspired to blindfold Sir Guy Lemare interfered again the next morning. There was no news either of Richard Forster or of Edward Bruce. But Jim was able to assure the breakfast-table that he did not think Dick could possibly come down till dinner-time, when he would probably bring Arthur Edwardes, who had also been kept in town. The office was uncommonly busy, and Jim was surprised he had been permitted to have a holiday. True, he had not yet learned the decisive part that Dick had played—that was a profound secret known only to two or three in the confidence of their master—but he suspected that Richard Forster, financier, had been taking a hand in the great game. These weeks in the office had enormously impressed him with the power of his future brother-in-law; and though he did not understand what Dick was doing or why he was doing it, he was quite content to wait. The future of his sister, who alone mattered, was perfectly secure. The wife of Richard Forster would be rich enough to keep the Manor in the family; and he did not fear poverty for himself. He was willing to work, and the reward of ambition, if successful, the love of Kitty, was the only reward he now desired. Meanwhile the partridges were ready to be killed. Accordingly Jim the evening before had insisted that Guy should join him in a short shoot. The time must be killed somehow until Edward Bruce returned. It could not be better spent than in killing birds as well. And Dot and Violet gladly volunteered to accompany the shooters. Guy even planned how, as they walked to the drive, he might very delicately warn Dot what a disagreeable fate was in store for her.

But even while they were walking Kitty and Dick were hurrying to the scene. Kitty, after breakfast, had rung up the office imperatively to demand information about Mr. Forster's movements. She was promptly told he had left in his motor for the Manor. Leaving her maid to follow with the luggage, she drove at once to Waterloo, and half an hour after Dick had been quietly ensconced with his papers in the library she was putting smiling inquiries to the funereal Henderson. Profound was her relief to hear that Mr. Forster had warned the butler that he was not to be disturbed at his work, save only by Miss Dot, who at that moment, two miles away, was anxiously pondering on the obscure remarks of Sir Guy Lemare. For Guy was conscious that he had been very clumsy and it upset his shooting. The birds were coming thick and strong, and when he did not miss them outright he quite failed to "neck" them with the beautiful precison with which Jim was delighting his loader.

"You are still very jumpy, old chap," Jim remarked, wiping his face, after bringing off a very pretty right and left. "It's not your form to keep stuffing them like that."

The soft rustle of Kitty's silk petticoat on the oak floor quite failed to warn the absorbed worker.

"Dick!"

"Hallo!" He put his pen down and jumped up, his face full of tender concern. "What's the matter?"

"Thank God, you're alone!" she murmured, leaning against his desk.

He wheeled up a big chair. "Sit down there," he said quietly. "Why, you're shaking like a leaf. Well, now, what's wrong? Have you heard from Tom?"

"Worse," she answered, "much worse." She drew a deep breath. "They've told you Sir Guy Lemare is here?" she questioned.

"Of course. The poor chap's gone shooting. Just as

well he should enjoy himself for one day. Perhaps he has already guessed what's been going on behind his back. He has come home in a mighty hurry, hasn't he?"

"Dick," Kitty said slowly, "Sir Guy Lemare, Dot's trustee—I've met him before."

Dead silence. Forster's gaze travelled over her face.

"You have met him before?" he repeated, as if he could not quite understand. "Kitty," he suddenly cried, "you don't mean——" And then he stopped, ashamed of himself.

"No, no," she answered passionately. "Not that, not that; but Lemare knows all about Tom and New York and all that happened there. He was a great friend of Tom's, and"—she sprang up, the words rushing out incoherently—"he has discovered I am here, in London, and he has come back to interfere, I know he has. What am I to do? what are we to do?"

He put his hands very calmly on her shoulders and gently forced her back into the chair. "Pull yourself together," he said soothingly. "This is serious."

"But," she cried, "can't you see——"

"Now, my dear, do be quiet. I want to think." He certainly wanted to think, but he also wanted to prevent this highly-strung, emotional woman from working herself into a collapse that could not be concealed from the household. "Now, answer my question, please: Lemare knows everything?"

"Everything. Tom——" she began excitedly. He held up a warning finger.

"Where did you see him last?"

"At Monte Carlo, two years ago. Do you remember the morning you arrived, that man and——"

He placed his cool and arresting fingers on her wrist. "Does he know your name is Barclay?"

"No, I don't think so. I told him my name was Wilson, and——"

"Did he at Monte Carlo see me, or speak to you about

me? Why, of course, he did. I remember he was at the next table at dinner. He was a great friend of Tom's, was he? and no friend of yours?"

"No. He is very strait-laced is Sir Guy Lemare." Kitty was growing more quiet under the influence of his cool self-possession.

"Strait-laced!" He laughed shortly. "Great travellers who have seen the natural woman at home always are." He leaned against the Jacobean mantelpiece, and reflected. "It's no use," he pondered aloud, "your going back to London on sudden business—that would give everything away. It's no use pretending you don't know him—that would be childish." He stroked his chin. "The question is, what he's come down here for."

"Lemare," Kitty interjected, "has been in Buenos Ayres just before he came to New York. He sailed from New York a week last Saturday."

"How do you know this?" Dick demanded sharply.

"Henderson told me a quarter of an hour ago."

"Buenos Ayres." An ugly look crept into Dick's eyes. "So he's been to Buenos Ayres. Been doing a little kidnapping. That's never a safe game to play, either for the kidnapper or the kidnapped." He took up a telegraph form and wrote on it rapidly, Kitty watching him with feverish interest. Then he quietly opened the garden door and disappeared for five minutes. "We've got six hours' start of Sir Guy Lemare," he said on his return, quietly lighting a cigarette. "Now, Kitty, why the deuce didn't you tell me all this before?"

"I thought—I felt sure—you would be safely married before he saw you or me for that matter. I was thinking only of you, Dick—you and Dot. Once you were married he couldn't do me any harm. And," she paused, "I was afraid."

"Oh, you women, you women!" He began to walk up and down.

"And what on earth are we going to do?" she asked,

and held her breath with parted lips. Every sound seemed to shake her. A motor could be heard coming from the stables and vanishing down the drive.

Dick laughed. "My telegram," he said significantly, "and no one will know I have sent one. My chauffeur don't tell tales, though he can tell lies when he fancies lies are the game. Tom, of course, is in London," he added.

"Tom?" She turned a white face of entreaty.

"I'll bet a diamond bracelet to a farthing Tom is in London. He always said he would return and have it back from you and me. So, I have been taking steps to deal with Tom."

"Yes, yes, but what are we going to do?" she repeated, half distracted.

"We're going to face it out," he said. "We're going to face the music, that's what we are going to do."

"But, Dick——" she implored.

"My dear, I am not going to desert you." Not even the news that Steer had planned to stab him in the back had set his jaw so relentless. "It's not you that Lemare has returned to break, it's me—me. Let him try, let him try." He controlled himself. "He wants to rob me of Dot—Dot!"—his voice broke. "By God! if he plays that card I'll send him to Portland as sure as my name is Richard Forster."

It had come at last; love had come at last to Dick, and as Kitty knew it would, the depth and strength of his passion mastered him body and soul. She could only think of Dick face to face with the prospect of losing the one woman in all the world who had been able to teach him what love was—losing her, perhaps, because nothing would shake the loyalty, tenderness and generosity of his friendship for herself. The prison cells of the past were claiming her; but if they also claimed the one man who had done all that a man could to strike off her fetters, then was she indeed miserable beyond the misery of women.

Dick had walked away to the window and was looking out. He, too, recognised the truth now. The sudden prospect of losing Dot, just as he had won her from the man who would have robbed him of wealth and honour, had revealed the sublime truth. He loved her, loved her with soul, brain and body, and to lose her now would be worse than to have failed in the great battle. For, to have won and to keep the love of Dot—that was life, and all else shrivelled into dust and ashes.

"Why are you crying?" he asked gently. "Don't be foolish, Kitty. You and I are going to see this through. It will be all right; trust me, it will be all right. Don't cry, my dear, don't cry. You shall be happy too."

She caught at his hands. "Throw me over, Dick," she sobbed, "I am not worth fighting for. But Dot and you——"

"Throw you over! You, Kitty, you who believed in me when I was a starveling in the gutter, who believed in me when no one else did? No, no; they shall take you, my friend, on my terms or"—he broke off. "Now run away. Put on your prettiest frock and leave the rest to me."

"But Lemare——" she faltered.

"Lemare is a gentleman. The drawing-room here is not a mining bar. We shall settle our little account as gentlemen, and I shall not forget what is owing to you."

So Kitty went with sad misgivings, but with unshaken confidence, in the all-conquering Dick's power to accomplish miracles. She reproached herself, too, that she had not dared to confess her most torturing thought, her strongest fear. What would Jim Wason say? what would he think? Under that blanching self-accusation her heart was silent and cold. And then passion welled up in a great and cruel cry. Love for them all, love for them all, but not for her. This was her punishment. Was there never to be an end?

Forster returned to his work. Lunch came. Mrs. Ottoway was out. He and Kitty ate in calm dignity together,

and then the gong sounded for tea, and with tea came the shooters. Their gay voices could be heard on the terrace amidst the clamour of the dogs. Very quietly Dick left Kitty and Mrs. Ottoway in the drawing-room, and went to meet the party. Great was the surprise, and in the general chatter Dick and Guy were introduced. The two men shook hands, a few formal speeches followed, and then the whole party trooped towards the drawing-room, Dick leading the way with Dot. He had grasped one important fact at once. Lemare had, so far, for reasons best known to himself, not utilised his time to speak out. He still had Dot's love. It remained to keep it.

Lemare, as Dick said, was a well-bred gentleman.

"That woman," he whispered hoarsely to Jim, drawing him aside—"who is that woman?"

"Woman! I like your impudence. That's Kitty, of course." In his delight at seeing her, Jim scarcely noticed his excitement.

Muttering something about his gun, Lemare slipped away. Henderson found him wiping his brow in the hall, and promptly brought him some brandy, for he needed it sorely.

"Thank you, thank you," he said, gulping it down. "Partridges are more trying than big game, eh?" And Henderson smiled in his most ominous manner.

"Kitty!" Guy murmured, when he was alone again. "Kitty! Good God! Poor Jim! Poor old Jim!" And it was some minutes before he could trust himself to face the drawing-room. When he did, Dot ran up to him.

"Kitty," she said, "has told us she has met you before. We are all quite excited."

And here was Kitty herself, holding out a hand. "Perhaps," she said, and she had never looked prettier, "perhaps Sir Guy Lemare has forgotten me."

Her smiling friendliness, the sight of Forster unconcernedly stroking Romola while he chatted to Mrs. Ottoway at the farther end of the room, quite unnerved him.

"I—er—remember perfectly," he replied slowly. "How do you do?"

"I don't believe you remember at all," Dot said, laughing. "You are only pretending."

"No." He gathered confidence. "I will refresh Mrs. Hennessy's——"

A cup clattered to the floor. Violet Edwardes, in a spasm of surprise, had let it drop. Mrs. Ottoway stopped in the middle of a sentence.

"Hennessy," Jim interposed. "You're dreaming, old chap. This is Mrs. Barclay."

"You were pretending after all," Dot said, shaking a finger.

Guy apologised. Dick went on with his talk as if he had not heard. But before five minutes had passed Mrs. Ottoway had again stopped in the middle of a sentence. Guy, for the second time, had called Kitty "Mrs. Hennessy." And the second time also, so engrained is habit, the slip had been unintentional.

"Oh, pray call me Mrs. Hennessy, Sir Guy," Kitty was saying, with a delightful shrug of her shoulders, "if you are more familiar with it. I am not particular."

And after that things went more smoothly. Tea and the partridges comfortably occupied half an hour. But Guy found occasion to get near to Forster and say something in a low voice. He nodded carelessly and crossed over to Dot.

"Sir Guy and I," he remarked in his most distinct tones, "find we have a little business to do together as, indeed, I expected. One is not a trustee for nothing. Settlements, these tiresome settlements! Perhaps you will excuse us, Mrs. Ottoway." He moved towards the door. "Shall we go into the library?" He waited for Lemare to nod his assent. "Ah, I was forgetting. We shall want a witness. Dot, you are no use, I fear. You are an interested party. Jim, you are the same." His eye ran round the room. "Mrs. Barclay, may we trouble you?"

Guy could not help admiring the well-bred calm with which, without any fuss, his imperious demand was being met. This man could counterfeit the ways of gentlemen.

"Perhaps," Kitty interposed, "Sir Guy would not approve of my being a witness to this particular settlement."

"On the contrary," was the emphatic reply, "I was on the point of asking for your help."

And in this prosaic manner the three walked in silence to the library. A chair was offered to Kitty and the door was closed.

"And now," Guy demanded, anger leaping in his voice —"and now, Mr. Forster, you will kindly explain what all this means."

"If you will state," Dick answered blandly, "what you wish explained, I have no doubt either Mrs. Barclay or I will be happy to satisfy you."

"Very well. I will come to the point at once. It may save trouble if I say that as Miss Wason's guardian——"

"Co-guardian"—and Guy accepted the correction with a petulant wave of his hand.

"I am here to insist on her engagement to yourself being broken off."

Dick took out his cigarette-case and offered it imperturbably to the angry Lemare, who declined it stiffly. "Pray, why?" he said, scraping a match provokingly on the box.

"Why? Because Miss Wason is ignorant of what you have been and are, Mr. Forster."

"Ah, don't be too sure. But we will let the remark pass for the present. Any other reason, Sir Guy?"

"Good heavens!" Lemare exclaimed, "when Miss Wason knows the truth, I do not think she will require any other reason."

"That remains to be seen. But, pardon my stupidity, what is this dreadful truth?"

"Mr. Forster," Guy replied in his most priggish manner, "you compel me to discuss details eminently dis-

tasteful." He glanced at Kitty. "But it is quite clear that your standard of conduct is"—he broke off for Dick was smiling. "I put on one side the fact that your business reputation is unpleasantly notorious, but when I find that some three years ago you shipped out of the country, this——" he paused.

"Woman," Kitty suggested. "It does not commit you to more than an undeniable fact."

"This woman's husband; that since then she has been living entirely on what you are pleased to allow her, and that you are paying her husband in Buenos Ayres to keep away from her;—that is enough for any decent-minded man. I will only add—it is my painful duty to add—that Mrs. Hennessy's history before she married my friend under circumstances sufficiently——"

"You will be good enough," Dick had broken in, "to leave Mrs. Barclay's history out of the discussion. You are Miss Wason's guardian, Sir Guy; you are not Mrs. Barclay's judge. And it is my conduct alone that you have any right to express opinions about."

"Perhaps," Guy was stung into saying, "when Mrs. Hennessy's husband, who is now in London——"

"Tom!—Tom in London!" Kitty sprang up from the chair in great agitation.

"Kitty," the tone was affectionate, and Guy glared with anger. "Kitty, please keep calm. Ah! my old acquaintance Tom, dipsomaniac Tom! He must have been a great comfort to you on the voyage. I trust you left your blackmailing friend in London not more than decently drunk. Well, Sir Guy, what next?"

Lemare stared at him. "What next?" he repeated. "Good Lord! sir——"

"Let us be reasonable. Has it occurred to you that perhaps Miss Wason already knows all this? I would remind you that Mrs. Barclay is in this house on the invitation of my betrothed's aunt, who is President of the Girls' Friendly Society in this country, and of similar

institutions; a lady who, as you are aware, has moral standards of her own. Come, come, Sir Guy, we don't want a stupid scandal. What are your terms for peace and silence?"

"Terms, sir? Do you seriously imagine I am here to bargain with you?"

"I most seriously do. Either you must hold your tongue——"

"I'm damned if I will."

"Tut, tut!" Dick threw away the stump of his cigarette. "Very well," he said sharply. "I desired to spare you, Sir Guy, what will, I fear, prove more than disagreeable. Let me warn you therefore that I knew some hours ago Tom Hennessy was in London. I think it is highly probable that he will shortly be in prison."

"In prison?" Lemare was startled.

"In prison," Dick repeated icily, "and the proceedings before he goes there will perhaps not reflect favourably on the spotless reputation of Sir Guy Lemare. You haven't considered that perhaps the drunkard Tom has a way of letting his friends in. Secondly, you have been pleased to refer to my character. Let me recommend you before you take any rash steps to make good your insults to inform yourself how the trust for which you are responsible to the law of this country has been administered in your absence—an absence that you might neglect your duties, to speak charitably, and be free to kodak native savages, and apparently to scavenge for scandal. Are you quite sure that *your* character, Sir Guy, will bear the investigation of a court dealing with a fraudulent breach of trust? Because I am not."

"What do you mean?"

"That I must leave you to ascertain for yourself. My duty is simply to protect the property of my future wife from those who would rob her, and endeavour to conceal their conduct by poisoning her mind by charges they cannot prove. Enough;"—he moved towards the bell—

"I propose now to ring and ask Miss Wason to hear what I have to say."

"Stop a moment, confound you!" Lemare cried, unprepared for this swift counter-stroke.

"You will be good enough," Dick retorted, "to keep your temper, and to remember that I am not accustomed to be bullied."

His eyes and words cowed the unfortunate Guy. An abyss was opening at his feet. Fiercely as his nature rebelled against surrender, prudence suggested delay.

"One minute, please," he urged, choking with wrath and fear.

Dick looked him all over with a contempt he did not attempt to veil. "Why?" he said coldly; "the sooner——"

"Dick!" Kitty pleaded, "don't be hard on Sir Guy. He is ignorant of what has happened in his absence. And Dot, oh, spare Dot the pain of hearing the truth."

"You are very generous," Dick said gently, yet with an emphasis that went home. "But for Dot's sake and yours —you whom Sir Guy has thought fit not to spare—I will make him an offer. Mr. Bruce returns to-night: until to-morrow evening at six-thirty Sir Guy must hold his tongue absolutely. The same will apply of course, to you, Kitty, and myself; after that we shall all be free to do what we think fit. Do you accept?"

Guy looked from one to the other. Dick's face was as flint. "You will not marry Miss Wason in the meanwhile?" he faltered.

Dick laughed. "Really," he said, "you are as ignorant of Miss Wason as you are of the laws of this country."

Guy wrestled with himself. "I accept," he said. "Silence on all sides until six-thirty to-morrow evening."

"Good. You are wiser than you know." He turned his back on him. "Come, Kitty, we will leave Sir Guy to enjoy his armed truce by himself."

And in the library Gertrude Wyatt, who had arrived by

a later train, found him pacing up and down like a caged beast. "What does it all mean?" he demanded brokenly, when he had explained what had passed. "Am I mad or——"

Her face was pale. She guessed the truth now. Was there to be no limit to the terrible evils in which this man whom she loved entangled everyone in order to compel them to work out his ambition as he chose? "It means," she answered, pressing her lips together, "that Richard Forster has you in the hollow of his hand, and if he pleases he can reduce you all to beggary. More, he can probably send Mr. Bruce and you to prison."

Sir Guy sat down impotently clenching his fist. Fool that he was, and had been! Fool! He paced ruthlessly to and fro while Gertrude eyed him with pity and contempt. This, too, was a man who claimed her love, a man who dared to pit himself against Richard Forster. Instrument after instrument was breaking. There now remained only Gertrude Wyatt. Ah, these bungling, foolish men. But it still remained to be seen what a woman, fighting for love and life, could do—a woman by herself.

CHAPTER XXIII

AFTER-DINNER THOUGHTS

THE curtains had not been drawn in the library though the great bronze lamp that hung from the centre of the carved ceiling had been lit, and through the leaded panes of the oriel window the October moon streamed in softly. On a cushion by the deep arched fireplace under the dancing shadows on the Jacobean mantelpiece, Dot sat alone, with Romola's head in her lap, and the light from the lamp mingling with the moonbeams shed its tender wizardry on her white dress. Through the half-open door beyond the intermittent click of billiard balls alone disturbed the quiet.

"Reading, Dot? Mrs. Ottoway surveyed her niece severely from the centre of the room.

"Yes, Aunt Elsa." She did not move. "Is the library not a place to read in?"

"Reading immediately after dinner, though it is not much dinner that you have eaten. No wonder your eyes are watery." She looked with cold disapproval at Violet and Gertrude who had entered with her. "Where is Richard?"

"Dick, I suppose, is busy somewhere else."

"Mr. Forster," Violet explained, "is smoking in the conservatory with Mrs. Barclay, who is, I believe, smoking too."

Mrs. Ottoway swept her train round and erected her gold-rimmed glasses. Dot turned a page.

"Why shouldn't Mrs. Barclay smoke?" Gertrude asked pleasantly, "if she wishes to?"

"Why shouldn't Richard," Mrs. Ottoway demanded, "flirt over a cigarette night after night in a dimly-lighted

alcove with a young and pretty widow in a very low-necked dress, if he wishes to?"

Gertrude laughed. "I understood Mr. Forster," she said, "was talking business with Mrs. Barclay. If he is responsible for Mrs. Barclay's dress he has something to be proud of. I never saw anything more perfect, except, perhaps, her hair and throat."

Mrs. Ottoway streamed across the room. "Business!" she repeated. "When a man wants to flirt he always calls it business."

"I should hope," Gertrude replied, "Mr. Forster would call it, in that case, not business but pleasure."

Dot had risen. Two spots of colour were in her pale cheeks. "If I could not trust Dick," she said, "to say to any woman what he chooses and for as long as he chooses, in the dark or in the light, I should never have promised to marry him."

Mrs. Ottoway shrugged her ample shoulders. "Exactly," she said, and left the room.

Gertrude smiled and passed through the door beyond. Violet alone remained. Before either could speak Arthur Edwardes had appeared, putting on his coat as if his game was over. His wife made a sign to him to go away, but just as he turned hastily, Dot rose.

"Please stay a minute, Mr. Edwardes," she said, "I want to ask you a question."

"A question"—he laughed awkwardly—"a question on oath, I suppose, as you are so serious!"

"You are a great friend of Dick's," Dot said, as if the question had long been framed in her mind; "you knew him and Mrs. Barclay in New York before you married Violet. Why did you call her once at dinner, Mrs. Hennessy?"

"Did he?" Violet asked in annoyed surprise. She had warned her husband to be careful.

"Did I?" Edwards repeated uneasily. "Did I? How very curious! I must——"

"I will tell you my reason for the question," Dot went on slowly. "Guy did exactly the same the first time he saw her in the drawing-room."

"Extraordinary!—Sir Guy did too? How very curious?"—but even with his wife's menacing eyes on him he quite failed to get any conviction into his faltering words. Dot was watching his face in a way that made Violet miserable. "Ah—er—it must have been a brain wave. Remarkable things these brain waves; er—men of science, you know, think that a brain——"

"A brain wave," Dot murmured. "Yes, it was a brain wave, I suppose. Thank you, Mr. Edwardes; I daresay a child had no right to ask such a question." She walked away and took Romola's head on to her lap by the hearth.

Arthur Edwardes closed the billiard-room door behind him. "Damn!" he said softly, but emphatically, to himself, and his brow was moist.

Violet stole over to the fireplace. "Dot," she said in her restful voice—"Dot, when we came in here you had been crying, over a book I suppose"—she picked it up. "The first and the last young woman who will ever cry over *The Official Handbook to the Stock Exchange.*" She pitched the volume away, kneeled down beside her friend and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "As girls, you and I, Dot," she said, "had no secrets from each other. We are girls still, are we not, you and I?"

Dot let her cheek rest against the elder woman's breast, while her fingers twined affectionately with those soothing fingers on her shoulder.

"Vi," she said, after a long and consoling pause, "did Mr. Edwardes tell you all about his life before he met you, after you had promised to marry him?"

"No, dear, I didn't want to know anything about that. I was too happy."

"Too happy!" Dot threw up her head with a gesture of pain, "It's true, Vi, it's true."

"True? Then Mr. Forster is——"

"No, you shan't say it of Dick—you mustn't; you mustn't. It is I who am not worthy of him. He is a great man, and I am only a child, ignorant of politics, business, finance, all the things that are his life. I am not clever like Gertrude, nor beautiful like"—she shivered—"Mrs. Barclay; I cannot talk to him as an equal of all that he is doing, all that he aspires to be."

"But you love him. What more can he want, or does want?"

"Yes," she answered with passionate simplicity. "God knows I love him."

"And he loves you, I am sure he does."

Dot looked up at her questioningly, yet deeply grateful. "Yes, he loves me in his way, perhaps as much as I deserve. You will think me foolish, Vi, but lately I have a feeling that in some strange manner a curtain from the past has dropped between Dick and me—a curtain which shuts out half his life, and conceals secrets that he may share with"—she hesitated—"some other woman."

Violet stroked her hair. "A man," she said, "is sure to have a few secrets which his wife should never need to know."

"Not secrets," came the quick reply, "that he cannot tell to the woman who has promised to marry him."

"Has a betrothed, then, more right than a wife?"

"Yes." Dot said without hesitation. "A wife cannot go back on her mistake if she has made one. It is her duty, therefore, to make the best of everything"—she paused. "But the betrothed—it is never too late for her."

"You little revolutionary!" Mrs. Edwardes was smiling. "Who taught you those strange ideas?"

Dot moved impatiently. "A girl," she said, "who tries to think for herself because she feels deeply is always called a 'revolutionary.' But it's no use arguing, Vi, or calling me names. If I fear that curtain I cannot help it, because I know here"—she laid her hand on her heart—"that if I were to discover that Dick was not what I be-

lieved him to be, it would break my heart. I don't fear the secrets; it is the thought that he had deceived me that I cannot banish—the fear of discovering too late that he asked me to be his wife not because he loved me better than any other woman, but because I am a poor little pawn of a girl in the great game of a strong man's ambition: an ornament, fit, perhaps, to be the mistress of his nursery and his drawing-room, but not the wife sharing in and inspiring all he thinks, dreams, does."

"Yes, yes, my dear. But a girl cannot be all that at once." Violet was speaking with intense earnestness. "Remember the strong man's dreams have been with him for years. You are the woman whom he has chosen from all the women he has known just a few weeks. The stronger and finer the man the more difficult are his dreams to understand. You must be as strong and as fine as he is before you are fit to interpret them, much less inspire those dreams. You must be patient. Trust—trust!"

"Have I not shown I trust him already?"

"Ah! Dot, you trust him now because you love him. That is only the beginning." She took her hands and looked into her troubled eyes. "But there is another, a deeper kind of trust; when a woman knows the worst the world can do; when she loves because she has learned what temptation and evil can be; when husband and wife have passed from the love of lovers to the sympathy of complete understanding; when they have faced life together and conquered together. That deeper love will cost you, as it costs every wife, bitter hours, but they are worth the reward they will bring."

Dot pondered in silence. "Then love," she questioned, "is not happiness, but pain?"

"Happiness," Violet said softly, "through many trials and much pain. A betrothed's love is one thing, a wife's another. That is why marriage, my dear Dot, is the supreme test; why, though you may find single women beautiful in character, noble in thought and deed, the noble

wife is a greater woman, because she alone can be taught by love that the most perplexing mysteries of life are not mysteries at all, but wonderful and sacred opportunities for the breath of the Spirit to reveal what can be revealed in no other way. Believe me, the higher and deeper a truth is, the more it will cost to find it, understand it and make it part of yourself; and the finest of all truths is the charity that marriage alone can teach."

Dot mused on this, staring into the fire. "Yes, I should like to believe that," she said at last. "I must believe it. But," with a sigh, "I fear that there is something out there in the past, that may give Dick and me all the pain, and then rob us of the happiness that the love you speak of alone can bring."

Violet stooped forward and kissed her. "Don't be petty, Dot," she whispered. "If you are in trouble go to your Dick and speak right out to him and to him alone."

"Yes," she said, "to be jealous is hateful. If I am still afraid to-morrow, I will confess it all to Dick." She rose. "Vi, Vi," she said tenderly, "you have helped me so much, so much." She stole away. Yet, had it not been for that conversation on the lawn when Gertrude talked about Mr. Hennessy and the strange accidents of to-day, those ignoble thoughts would never have arisen. Gertrude had indeed done her work with diabolical insight, for she had relied on subsequent events to deepen the light touches of the pioneer. She had gauged Dot's character to a nicety, and she had been singularly aided by Fate. And poor Dot had her brother to think of as well as herself. Yet, to go to Dick, to reveal to Dick what was in her mind, was forbidden by pride, by shame at confessing she could harbour such a suspicion. To pain Jim, to be disloyal to Kitty, when it was unnecessary, how hateful and ignoble! To-morrow, yes, to-morrow would be time enough. To-morrow, that fatal to-morrow! For Dick, like everyone else in this tangled web of Fate, was ignorant of much that had happened, and it is by ignorance

more than by positive wickedness that the tragedies of life are miserably worked out.

Violet, too, after Dot's departure, debated with herself an anxious question: should she drop a hint to Dick? Dared she interfere? Would not to-morrow be much better? She was, to tell the truth, as much afraid of this great man as she was attracted by him. She herself felt that she had already succumbed to the influence of this masterful personality, simply because she had drifted into accepting what he said and did as right. It was the duty of all of them—the women in particular—to take the places silently assigned by his ambition, to play their part in helping him to realise the best of which he was capable. Dot and Jim Wason alone were the exception. She had known both all her life. Their independence to-day filled her with astonishment. Brother and sister, in their own way, were with quiet obstinacy refusing to acquiesce as everyone else acquiesced, unless the acquiescence fitted in exactly with their own ideas. And Gertrude? Violet invariably found herself studying Gertrude rather than Kitty. This young woman with the classical head and the superb physique was, she instinctively felt, the real danger. Of the combination of beauty and passion in her own sex, Violet had no fear; women of that type were embarrassing perhaps, but they had a heart, and in the long run, you can appeal to the heart, and the heart will win; but not without reason did she fear the woman that Gertrude was—the union of passion and beauty—to whom in the place of a heart Nature had given ambition and a brain capable of realising it. Violet's reverie was interrupted by Mrs. Barclay's voice, singing quietly but with rebellious gaiety as she strolled through the billiard-room, and the snatch of defiant song drove her to the drawing-room. Kitty, however, had scarcely entered the library when Guy followed her and closed the door. Kitty turned to see who the newcomer was, and with premeditated audacity flung herself into a chair.

"What are your orders now, please?" she asked over her shoulder. "Don't pretend that you haven't any, for they are written in the curl of your hair, Sir Guy."

He frowned. He took himself seriously, and he expected women to do so also.

"You must make Mr. James Wason understand," he said very coldly, "that you——"

Kitty opened her fan. "Don't trouble to continue," she interrupted. "Mr. Forster has just been giving me the same straight tip, over a cigarette. You and he, for once, seem to agree."

"Forster? Forster has——"

"You are surprised that other men, too, enjoy preaching. But as neither you nor I can afford to quarrel with Dick Forster, we shall both no doubt do just as he tells us."

Guy, in spite of himself, could not keep his eyes off her. As she reclined in that chair, with the pale light on her hair, the man within him felt that never were there lovelier eyes, a lovelier skin, a more captivating figure. Defiant as those eyes were, there was something in them too, to-night, that stirred his pity.

"One good turn deserves another," Kitty said, playing with the locket on her breast. "Dick is a bite bigger than most men, or women for that matter, can chew. I'm thirsty," she added, with charming irrelevance. "Split a Polly with me, will you, with a touch of whisky in it?"

"Guy"—Jim had sauntered in—"they're waiting for you. You shall share the drink instead with me, Mrs. Barclay."

Guy stalked out, but not before he knew that Kitty had seated herself on the arm of the chair and was swinging two tiny feet in a foam of frills.

"Do you know," Jim held out the filled tumbler, "that you are just adorable to-night?"

"Your health, Mr. Censor. Like my slippers, Mr. Wason?"

"You are trying to shock me, as you shocked Guy Lemare. But you can't. Why are you so foolish, so utterly foolish? Do you really imagine that even an undergraduate doesn't know the difference between the woman who thinks that a man always wants to live in a club smoking-room and——" He paused.

"And?" she tossed her chin.

"And the woman he hopes to make his wife."

"Paupers," rebuked Kitty, with a flash of despairing defiance, "have to ask for leave before they can——"

Jim took the glass from her unresisting fingers. "That taunt," he said quietly, "was not worthy of you, Mrs. Barclay. But you did not mean it. Kitty"—he laid a hand on hers.

"Let me go," she said in a low voice. "How dare you call me Kitty?"

"Will you promise to listen if I tell you a story?" And she looked up in wondering fear with the eyes of that innocent child in the photograph she had burned. "Rather more than three years ago, I was walking one evening in Hyde Park with Sir Guy Lemare. There was a block in the carriages at the Marble Arch, and in a victoria beside me I caught sight of a face, a woman's face, the loveliest face I have ever seen. I recognised then that henceforth the woman who had that face was the only woman in the world for me. I was a mere boy, a silly, idle, extravagant and dissipated boy. Ah, they don't know that the undergraduate heir already was on the devil's own road. There is gambling in one half of my blood, gambling and other things. Fate, however, was kind to me. It pulled me up—at the Marble Arch. Then, in the nick of time I found a photograph, and the rest you know. No, not quite. When I first saw that face, I pointed it out to Sir Guy. He said that it was the face of a worthless woman. I denied it passionately then. I am a man now, a pauper if you will, but I deny it—yes, I deny it more passionately to-night. But remember. That woman alone can make

me cease to believe in her. Please God, she will not, for if she does I will go straight down the devil's road from which she once saved me."

When he had finished, Kitty was trembling. And Jim trembled too. With Jim's story these two had reached the supreme crisis of their lives, and they both recognised the solemn fact.

"Thank you, Mr. Wason," she said at last. "It is because—because I want to—I should like to keep you from the devil's road that——" she nerved herself for an effort. "I am not free, even if I were willing, nor am I fit to become your wife."

"I am going to be my own judge as to that."

"It is God's truth," she answered brokenly. "And now that I have made the cruellest confession that any woman can make to a man who—oh, leave me, leave me!"

"No"—his firmness was uncompromising—"I cannot ask you to be my wife. I am, and you know it, a pauper. But I do not leave you until you have told me whether I may return one day——"

"Oh, go, go!" she whispered.

"Kitty, I love you! More," he came up to her and caught her hand, "I believe—I know you love me."

What was a wretched woman to do? Perjure herself by denying it? Tell the truth and perhaps lose him forever? Kitty, in the grip of passion, with the man she loved at her side, was swept away in the tides that no reason can control, perhaps no reason ought to control.

"Wait," she cried,— "wait till to-morrow. I swear to answer you then. Jim, I ask it—because I love you."

"Kitty!" But she wrenched herself free.

"Silence, silence, please. If to-morrow evening you still say you love me, still ask me to be your wife, then——" She pleaded with those wonderful eyes for forbearance, for mercy now—for love hereafter.

"I promise," he said, slowly fighting with passion too, "because I both trust and love you. But to-morrow it is

either 'yes' or the devil for me." He seized her hand to kiss it, but she snatched it back with a sob of pain.

"No, no," she moaned. "You hurt me, you hurt me. Go."

And being a brave, strong man, he went.

"God forgive me!" she whispered with an exceeding bitter cry, tottered to a chair and covered her face.

Arthur Edwardes cautiously put his head in at the door, and then Lemare and he entered.

"Kitty," Edwardes began in the friendliest way.

"Don't call me 'Kitty,'" she interrupted, "you coward!"

"Lemare and I," he went on suavely, "have been talking this unfortunate business over. We think we see our way——"

"Ah!" She had risen and confronted them. "In plain words, you wish to save the credit of the men at the expense of the women—as usual. Well?"

Lemare came forward. "Mrs. Barclay," he said, "if you will consent to go away to-morrow quietly, Edwardes and I will undertake that not a word shall be said against you. And Tom Hennessy shall go back to Buenos Ayres by the next steamer."

"And Dick Forster?" she demanded.

"He will no doubt back us up"—Lemare was delighted by her readiness to discuss terms—"for Dot's sake."

"Dot is to be told nothing?"

"You may be satisfied that the explanation will harm neither Dot nor you."

"And her brother?"

"I will make myself responsible for Jim Wason," he said, after a pause.

Kitty walked into the centre of the room, a beautiful woman at bay. "Sir Guy," she said, with an icy calm, "some years ago an intimate friend of yours did me a great wrong. He was compelled to make reparation for it, though you did your best to persuade him that he was acting in a Quixotic manner. Those were your words. I

have not forgotten them. Three years ago I was set free from the world to which your friend and you had degraded me. And now you, the Puritan, tell me it is my duty to return to it"—the passion swept into her voice—"yes, now that I have won the love of an honest man you would rob me of it! You shall not—you shall not!"

"Ah!" Lemare sprang forward. "Jim has——"

"Steady," Edwardes seized his arm, "Keep cool, you fool!"

"Yes, Jim has asked me to be his wife."

"And——?" Lemare's anger made his face white.

"And to-morrow evening, if he will marry me, I will marry him. That is my answer to your insulting proposal."

"You—wanton!"

She turned her back on him. But as she passed towards the door Lemare stopped her.

"Very well," he said. "You have thrown away your chance. I shall not spare you now."

Kitty measured him with scorn. "Look to yourself, Sir Guy," she replied. "I fear you no longer."

But at that moment Gertrude Wyatt walked in.

CHAPTER XXIV

"UNLESS" THE WOMAN

GERTRUDE'S entry was not purely due to chance. Nothing indeed she had said or done that evening had been without its purpose, and her friendly but wonderful calm, in such marked contrast to Kitty's heightened colour and blazing eyes and Guy Lemare's pale face, was strengthened by her confidence that events were marching much better than she expected. She had intercepted Dot on her way from the library to her room and promptly invited her to enjoy the beauty of the night on the terrace. Together, with the inseparable Romola and Savonarola, the two girls had strolled up and down under the stars, while Gertrude with her delicate strokes had alternately soothed and recreated the suspicions that she rightly guessed were beginning to torture. After all, Dot's knowledge of her own sex was even more limited than her knowledge of the world in general. Poverty, the sternest and most fertile school of character and knowledge, she had never known.

In surroundings of wealth and comfort a young man will probably learn much; but a young woman, whose horizon has been bounded by the class-rooms of a High school, the gardens of country houses, and carefully selected novels, for whom everything has gone with smoothness and ease, must at twenty-one be very ignorant of human nature. Her world acts on the comfortable assumption that innocence is the fairest flower of ignorance. But it forgets that the happy ignorance it can successfully preserve for the girl is too often not the ignorance that teaches the ultimate need of knowledge, but the ignorance that teaches there is nothing further to be known. For a creed of life, Dot therefore, as so many girls are, was obliged to fall back on the elemental and imperishable

instincts of womanhood. Yet life, both in men and women, that is directed by the elemental dictates of the heart alone, however pure, just and true, will be full of puzzling and painful surprises, because it has not learned that men and women cannot and never will live by the heart alone. Gertrude had been trained in a very different world to Dot's, and she had started with a very different equipment. To Gertrude, therefore, Dot's noble simplicity was an instrument on which her skilled fingers played as ambition directed. But for Gertrude the most difficult part of her task, thrust on her by the failure of her plans, remained. This evening was to decide whether a woman could wrest success from the failures of men.

For a few minutes she chatted with the two gentlemen while Kitty sat and reflected on what had just taken place. From Sir Guy Lemare she could now expect no mercy. He had come back, as Dick said, not to break her but Richard Forster. But now he would try to break her too. More, he would probably prefer to take his revenge on her rather than on Dick. It was so much easier to punish a woman than a man, and Kitty knew that Dick and herself would not be judged by the same standards. Moreover, if a sacrifice were necessary, these men had showed her it would be the woman who would be selected. Whether this was right or wrong, Kitty felt it was idle to argue or protest; injustice may provoke the bitterest revolt and the most irrefutable criticism, but if it can be enforced it is that fact alone that matters. She had won Jim's love; she loved him; to keep his love—that was all for which she now fought, and for this she must fight single-handed. Kitty, on the sofa, saw only one clear conclusion. The next twenty-four hours would decide her life. She was no wicked woman bent on securing a husband by any means. She had no intention of deceiving Jim, but she desired that when the truth was told it should not be by her enemies. At Monte Carlo she had been taught the

bitter lesson that the man who had been sent to Buenos Ayres kept himself informed somehow of her life, and was ready to exact the revenge of the cur if she tried to escape, as two years ago, from the prison cells of the past. So to-day he would not scruple, by lies, if need be, to poison the minds of those who would have to judge her—to get her condemned, and Richard Forster with her, before they were aware of it.

Kitty was in a very cruel—for a woman, an impossible—position. For Dick and Dot's sake, for Dick's in particular, she had consented to conceal a little longer what she fully intended to reveal to the man whom she loved. Yet this generous soul never regretted the penalty this silence imposed on herself. It would be terrible in the end to lose Jim; it would be far worse than terrible now that any selfishness on her part should wreck the happiness of Dick and Dot—Dick who had at last learned what love was. Kitty looked up. Gertrude had quietly seated herself beside her. They were alone, as Gertrude desired they should be.

"Do not be angry," Gertrude said, "if I allude for one moment to what, I fear, is an unpleasant topic, Mrs. Barclay. Will it surprise you to hear that the Mr. Hennessy of whom we spoke a few days ago is now in London?"

Kitty checked the reply on her tongue. Her eyes were searching the speaker's impassive face.

"Mamma," Gertrude went on, "was very excited when she heard it. She took me with her to see him"—this was not strictly true, for Mrs. Wyatt did not know he was in London—"and she was dreadfully shocked."

"Why?"

Gertrude smiled a little. "Mrs. Barclay," she said, "you always look at me as if I were an enemy of yours. I am not going to try to persuade you of the contrary. We women prefer to trust, and rightly, our intuitive feelings and instincts. But at the risk of offending you, I say plainly that Mr. Hennessy is a cur as well as a sot."

She thought him a cur and a sot, though she did not add that curs and sots can be very useful sometimes. Nor did Gertrude really care two pins whether Kitty was a good woman or a bad one, whether she married Jim Wason or did not. She was only determined that Richard Forster should not marry Dorothy Wason. She even felt some pity for Kitty. It hurt her belief in the rights of womanhood to reflect that another woman should perhaps be in the power of such a man as Tom Hennessy. "And," she rose, "he will do you as much mischief as he can."

"Miss Wyatt," Kitty asked anxiously, "what do you mean?"

Gertrude paused. "He has written," she said slowly, "a letter to Mr. Bruce. Mr. Hennessy told me himself in confidence that when Mr. Bruce got that letter he would have had his revenge—for what, I do not know." Kitty had risen too, fear in every feature. "I do not consider myself," Gertrude proceeded, "bound to keep the confidence of a cur. I have told you, that you may be prepared to meet that letter, as no doubt you can."

"And the letter—when will it come?" Kitty was trembling with excitement.

Gertrude reflected. "I don't think it can arrive before to-morrow morning. Mr. Hennessy is not a very reliable person, I fancy."

She moved away to meet Sir Guy, who had returned. Her work for the present was done. She read in Kitty's eyes truly enough a single burning determination. That letter must never reach Mr. Bruce's hand, and Gertrude smiled with pleasure. It was Sir Guy's duty to make the next move, and he, poor man, ignorant that he was a mere puppet under a girl's direction, could not refuse to prove that he could give Mrs. Barclay twenty-five in a hundred at billiards and beat her.

Gertrude had once read that a great commander had said that in war five minutes might make all the difference, and she smiled now as she recognised the truth of the

observation. Scarcely had the billiard-room door closed on Guy and Kitty when the funereal Henderson marched into the library with the evening mail-bag, and it was essential to the plan which she was so delicately engineering that, when the contents of that bag were investigated, neither Kitty nor Guy should be present. The family party gradually assembled, as it always did, for the post to be distributed; but had Gertrude contemplated any manipulation of the letters she had her opportunity, since, for several minutes, she was alone with the bag, and Henderson had thoughtfully laid the key by its side. Gertrude, however, certainly did not intend to soil her fingers with anything so clumsy or so stupid as theft. She simply looked at the bag with quiet satisfaction, and then obligingly helped Jim Wason to sort the letters. They were both in excellent spirits. Although a young man is in love with a beautiful woman he need not be averse from fifteen minutes' brisk conversation with another beautiful woman. Gertrude was aware, too, that Mrs. Ottoway secretly and strongly disapproved of her, and that his aunt's sleep would be postponed if she were fluttered by the idea that Miss Wyatt contemplated one day reigning as mistress of the Manor. Accordingly, she made the fifteen minutes twenty-five, during which her fine grey eyes said many pleasant things to Mr. James Wason, and the sorting of the mail-bag ended in a piece of pretty romping which Gertrude enjoyed quite as much as Jim. Yet all the time her eye was on the clock, and her mind was calculating exactly how long Robin would take to bring Mr. Bruce back from the station. Before Robin's hoofs were heard on the gravel another step must be taken.

"Well, which won?" she asked, strolling into the billiard-room.

"Mrs. Barclay," Guy answered sulkily. He had heard the laughter of that romping and it had not sweetened his defeat.

"Ah, the woman," Gertrude replied. "Thank you,

Mrs. Barclay, for vindicating the capacity of our sex for beating a man when he is put on his mettle. By the way, Sir Guy, there are some letters for you in there." A faint elevation of her eyebrows signified to Kitty that she had something important to say in private. "The letter has come," Gertrude went on slowly. "I saw it myself in the mail-bag and recognised the handwriting."

Kitty drew a deep breath of pain. The cue in her hand rattled to the ground. "Come?" she repeated in a dull voice, "the letter has come?"

Gertrude nodded. She felt no pity now, only the calm satisfaction that the scientific researcher on the eve of some momentous discovery feels when the subject of his investigation betrays under a test exactly the symptoms that he requires to clinch his proof. After all, if women were such victims of their own passions as to put themselves into the power of a sot and a cur, they must expect to suffer, and suffering alone by one generation of women can teach the indispensable lesson to their sisters in the next. "But," she added reassuringly, "no one knows it is there. I confess," she laughed gently, "I never was so near stealing in my life. But then it is no affair of—mine, and stealing—well——" She shrugged her shoulders with a suggestion of genial and tolerant charity.

In her agony of fear Kitty quite forgot that Gertrude Wyatt had very nearly succeeded in winning the love of Richard Forster, and that failures of this kind may make a woman vindictive and dangerous.

"If," she said, with a laugh too, "if I stole that letter, Miss Wyatt, what would you say or think?"

"I?—nothing of course. I believe if I were in your place I should certainly steal it"—she moved gently a step or two—"I fear, though, you can't steal it now. Dot has locked up all her uncle's letters in the roll-top desk and she has the key."

Ah! there at last were Robin and the cart-wheels on the gravel. She had calculated to a nicety. Kitty fol-

lowed her, racked by anguish, into the library. Perhaps in half an hour Mr. Bruce would have read what Tom Hennessy had to say. Sir Guy was destined to win after all. Such was fate—a woman's fate. But Gertrude, had Kitty only divined it, had no intention of letting Mr. Bruce read that letter this evening. She had not spoken to Kitty simply for the purpose of inflicting useless pain, of holding out a hope for the pure pleasure of dashing it to the ground. A woman, it is commonly believed, will inflict on another woman pain for pain's sake; but Gertrude, with all her faults, was not guilty of such ignoble meanness. She desired a particular end; if the infliction of pain was necessary to attain that end she did not hesitate; but her ambition was too grand to find any pleasure in the paltrinesses of weaker and more shallow natures. She waited, therefore, calmly with Kitty and Dick while the others streamed into the hall to welcome Mr. Bruce and to give him the unpleasant intelligence that Guy had suddenly come back, as Mr. Bruce would know only too well, burning for much talk with his co-trustee. Gertrude, indeed, had reckoned on this. And when Edward Bruce was brought into the library the sight of his pale face and hollow eyes made her feel how glad she was that she had taken the direction of affairs into her own hands. This harassed and despondent country squire was not the man to insist on Richard Forster's marriage being broken off in obedience to moral scruples. He would be only too glad to accept any terms Richard Forster chose to dictate.

"There are a lot of letters for you, Mr. Bruce," Gertrude said, and then smiled reassuringly at Kitty. "I don't think you ought to read them to-night. You look dreadfully tired."

"Certainly not," Dot chimed in innocently. "You are not to look at a single letter, and, lest you should, I have locked them in that desk and I have the key."

Kitty breathed again. A few hours' respite—a few hours' respite!

"And supposing you lose it?" Gertrude inquired. Dot was notorious for losing her keys.

"I shan't lose it, for I shan't keep it," Dot retorted. "Dick, you shall keep it for me. And," she added, laughing, "if you give it to Uncle Edward or anyone else without my permission, I shall break off our engagement."

Dick took the key, laughing too. Two women's hearts were beating fast in that room though no one knew it.

"Dot is a young woman of her word," Gertrude remarked smilingly, and her eyes were brilliantly bright. "We shall all remember that threat, Mr. Forster."

She crossed over to Sir Guy Lemare, to keep him in play, in fact, for two or three minutes while Kitty, as she guessed, would seize the opportunity thus thoughtfully provided to convey her wishes to Dick. Two or three minutes, that was all. More would be dangerous.

"Dick," Kitty had just time to mutter, "you must come to the library at one o'clock to-night when the others are all safely in bed."

"But——"

"I can't explain. Lemare is watching me like a cat. One to-night, here—here. Don't fail."

"Something wrong?"

"Yes. Life and death for me and for you. You will come?"

He nodded. "Good-night, Mrs. Barclay," he said aloud, and walked carelessly away.

Gertrude had not heard what had passed between them, but she was satisfied that Richard Forster had not given Kitty the key. It only remained now to see that no further intercourse took place between them, and that was a very easy matter. She lit Kitty's candle for her as well as her own, and carried her off, well aware that Dot and Dick were talking softly at the foot of the stairs for fully ten minutes after she parted from Kitty at her bedroom door. And now that she was in her dressing-gown and had dismissed her maid, she lit all the candles as she stood in front

of the long mirror and proudly let her hair down. It rippled on to her fine shoulders, and with eyes still triumphantly glowing she stroked her arms for the sheer pleasure of feeling how beautifully moulded they were. If her hair was not so marvellous as Kitty's, and her skin not such a miracle of delicacy, Nature had provided ample compensation.

Downstairs, in the library, Edward Bruce would gladly have postponed what must be said to his co-trustee, but Guy was inexorable. More, he curtly declined to permit Richard Forster or Arthur Edwardes to withdraw. So Edwardes drew his chair up to the table and listened with the keenest attention. Dick alone lounged by the fireplace and smoked his cigar with consummate indifference.

It did not take long to lay the position bare. Sentence by sentence the once genial country gentleman was driven into admitting damning fact after damning fact. He had been lured originally into taking a prominent share in the promotion of the syndicate; he had been convinced that unless he went further the venture would fail; he had been, as many before him, jockeyed by elaborate financial manœuvres and cross manœuvres—which he professed to understand but did not—into deeper and deeper water; his own resources had failed him; he had drawn on the funds of his wards; his co-trustee had given him unreserved power to act on his behalf in his absence; there was neither banker nor lawyer with legal rights to check him. Then had come a boom; without his knowing it he had been dragged into a colossal financial campaign, to make a corner and all the rest of it. It is an old, old story, and its details may be read over again in the wreckage-charts of the bankruptcy courts and of the Incorporated Law Society. Edward Bruce was not, however, as so many have been, a man plunging for immoral purposes; he had not speculated to satisfy a greedy and heartless mistress or to provide himself with luxury to which his position gave him no right. He was an admirable justice of the

peace, a strong "churchman," an enthusiastic politician, a good landlord, a tender uncle, popular with everyone, from the curly-headed children of his gamekeepers to his brother landlords with whom he dined, shot and maintained the law of the land. But he was also an amateur and he was cursed with the gambler's curse.

In half an hour Lemare wearily pushed the sheet of paper and the pencil away, and stared at the moonlight streaming in through the leaded panes of the oriel window. This was ruin—ruin and shame. Bruce was a pauper, he was a pauper, and the young man and young woman for whose fortunes he was jointly liable were paupers too. And if Jim and Dot chose to demand at the tribunal of justice their squandered property, Guy imagined what a judge might say as to the way in which a distinguished traveller had discharged duties for which he was legally responsible. The infamy of the pass to which he, the upright, had been brought! Yet, when he saw Edward Bruce's face he shivered.

"It is no use whimpering now," Lemare said, rising. "Of course, Bruce, I have no desire to shirk my share."

"Guy, my dear Guy." Bruce took his hand in helpless, grateful affection.

Edwardes looked at Dick, callously smoking his cigar. Would Dick say nothing?

"We have been swindled," Bruce burst out. "The syndicate has been wrecked by a counter syndicate. The whole thing is simply a colossal fraud, led by some unscrupulous financier who, to gratify his own greed, has brought ruin on hundreds of innocent men and women. Steer, who knew the whole truth, is dead. But it is well-known in the city that the White Lead Syndicate has not perished on its merits. It could be revived; it could flourish; we could be rich—but for that man. It is awful to think such monsters of iniquity can exist, can go unpunished."

Dick threw the stump of his cigar into the fire. As he

rose something in his eyes made Edwardes catch his breath sharply. "I wonder," he said softly to himself.

"Yes"—Lemare came back from the window—"I have only one question to ask. Mr. Forster, I have been told—I cannot believe it—that you are the financier who has ruined the White Lead Syndicate."

Bruce stared speechless. Edwardes dropped the match in his fingers, and it burned itself out on the rug unheeded.

"It is quite true," was the calm reply. "The financier who smashed up the White Lead Syndicate is, as you say, Richard Forster."

Dead silence.

"Dick," Bruce's imploring voice broke out, "Dick, I take back my words. But you will save us. You will——"

"It is impossible to let the White Lead Syndicate come to life again. It was a swindle, and worse. It was bound to crack up in any case. It deserved its fate, and I am glad I have been able to punish the gang of thieves who conspired to defraud the public."

"But, Dick, for God's sake, reflect——"

Forster laughed that short, grim laugh of his. "I have reflected," he said uncompromisingly. "It is quite impossible for me to undo what has been done, absolutely impossible."

"Then"—Bruce was almost incoherent—"then we—Guy, I, Dot, Jim—are to——"

"I have already explained that what has happened makes no difference in our relations. But I may say briefly that I hope to be able to show Sir Guy Lemare and yourself at the proper time"—he glanced significantly at Guy—"how this unfortunate business can be settled so as to satisfy everyone completely. Come, don't worry," he added, in a kindly tone. "I have a plan; it only needs a night's repose to finish it. It will be all right—believe me, it will be all right."

"Yes, it will be all right," Edwardes repeated con-

fidently. "You can trust Dick, Mr. Bruce—I pledge my honour you can—to do everything that is just."

"Certainly," was the quiet answer. "Dot and Jim, of course, must be first consulted as a matter of form. You can sleep in peace, Bruce. It will be all right."

In ten minutes he had persuaded the unhappy gambler to go to bed, full of hope. Edwardes, who had divined what the plan was, followed him. He wanted to make his wife, anxiously waiting upstairs, happy too.

Lemare alone remained. "I understand at last," he said, with slow significance.

"No, you do not. You have only heard one side so far." Dick looked at his watch—a quarter past eleven. "I am now going to tell you the real facts of the White Lead Syndicate."

It was a purely financial story that he told. But when at a quarter to twelve Lemare walked thoughtfully to his bedroom he understood with appalling clearness why, before six-thirty to-morrow, he must decide whether he would accept Richard Forster's terms and hold his tongue, or let ruin and shame fall on his co-trustee and himself. Other alternative there was none, unless—for there is always an "unless" in the crises of men's destinies, and it invariably turns on a woman's will. Lemare had forgotten Dorothy Wason, Gertrude Wyatt and Kitty Barclay, and so had Richard Forster.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT THE LIBRARY HEARD

THE clock whispered one into the ear of the statue of Truth at the foot of the stairs, and the stroke soaked in soft echoes into the mystical shadows of the hall. A faint rustle of a dress and a shuffling step on the floor. The door of the library was cautiously opened and Kitty's frightened eyes peered in. The room was empty, though the bronze lamp was alight and the curtains over the oriel window had been drawn. With a beating heart she waited behind the half-open door. Someone was coming from the billiard-room.

"Thank God, it's you, Dick," she whispered, half-sobbing and running to meet him. "What were you doing out there?"

He held up a warning finger. "Making sure that our famous traveller wasn't lying doggo under the palms, and securing your retreat. If you hear anyone coming, whip as quick as you can through the billiard-room into the conservatory and wait there—don't forget the step down. I told Lemare I might be working late, so my presence here is accounted for. But sit down. You look as if you had seen a spectre."

"We must be quick——" she panted.

"Sit down. I don't want a fainting woman in my arms. Did anyone hear you on the stairs?"

"No. I very nearly trod on Savvy, and I knocked my knees against that beastly Venus on the landing, and the pain made me quite sick."

"Poor little woman! Did Savvy bark?"

"No."

Kitty, from the sofa, watched him make up some papers.

"I don't believe," she said, "you have a nerve in the whole of your body, Dick"

"No, thank heaven. A man must be all nerves, a bundle of quivering agony, or have none, to succeed nowadays. It's your half-and-halfers, who don't know whether they can defy their nerves or whether their nerves will defy them, who go to bits."

"Dick"—she sat up, with eyes burning with curiosity—"you are so calm, I am sure you have done this sort of thing before."

"Yes," he laughed gently, "I've done it more than once. But it's quite clear you haven't, or you would have taken off that silk petticoat."

"Who was she?" she asked with intense interest.

"Oh, it wasn't a she. It was a financial secret I was after. It's not till you have come out on top that you can afford to make an ass of yourself for a she. That's why so many young men never get further than the first rung or two. The silk petticoat trips them up." He listened attentively. "If," he said with great gravity, "Lemare found you and me here, nothing could save us—nothing. But," he was smiling to comfort her, "I revel in these thrilling half-hours. Didn't you think," he sat down on the sofa, "that I played the cards pretty well in this room before dinner? Goodish bluff, eh? Lemare had all the aces and the prig dropped 'em on the floor because he was so primed up with self-satisfaction. These co-trustees are done brown, my dear, done brown in bread crumbs, with their tails in their toothless jaws. Poor old Uncle Edward, I expect, at this minute is punching his pillow and feeling his pulse. Preposterous old egoist!"

"You are an awful man, Dick; if I didn't love you, I should hate you."

"So? Well, I didn't cut my wisdom teeth in a Jacobean Library or in the class-room of a moth-eaten university." He sauntered to the fireplace. "Uncle Edward, I fear, is like most of those upper-class amateurs who imagine that

if you read the financial article in *The Times*, and correct it by the fortnightly pamphlet of an outside broker, you can cope with men to whom failure means a suit with the broad arrow on it, or dodging detectives from Europe in a one-horse South American republic. Gad! if these fellows with a stake in the country had to work their way up from a twopenny doss-house, they would make this country the first in the world. The fact, my dear Kitty, is, that the class that governs this ancient Empire is only saved from extinction by constant recruits from the pick of the gutter like myself. It's the judicious mixture of clever rascality with brainless respectability that produces the women who can bear sons ready to die on the Niger or the Zambesi. It's the women of the manors, after all, who are the real backbone of what we call a democracy. My son will have to marry a minx on the make, or the Forsters in the third generation will be only fit to take a peerage or entertain the ladies of the ballet at supper. Dot," he added, with a reflective hand on his chin, "will have some difficulty, I fear, with that minx on the make. Well, well." He mused for a minute or two in silence. "But we must come to business. Tom has written, of course?"

"Yes, but how——"

"It's in every line of your face," he laughed. "H'm! So Tom has written?"

"To Mr. Bruce. The letter is in there—in there." She pointed excitedly to the locked desk. "He means to ruin you and me." She jumped up. "I must have that letter at once. Give me the key."

"Steady!" He resumed his seat on the sofa and drew her back gently.

"That letter is in there. No one knows it has come. I've only to take it out and——"

"No one knows it?" He fixed penetrating eyes on her.

"No one but Gertrude Wyatt and me," she answered impetuously.

"Gertrude Wyatt!" He was surprised. "How's that?"

Kitty explained volubly, while he stroked his chin. "Quietly, my dear, quietly," he remarked. "It is not necessary to wake the whole house. Hark!—what is that?" He pointed to the door of the billiard-room, and while Kitty vanished as swiftly as she could, he walked out into the hall. But there was no one there. He waited a minute to be quite sure and then summoned Kitty back. "I fancied I heard the rustle of a woman's dress," he remarked, "but I suppose I was mistaken."

"Why not lock the door?" Kitty suggested.

"No. Financiers don't work in the dead of night with locked doors. You understand there are other reasons too, that we needn't go into. Now, about this letter. Plainly, I draw the line at robbing another man's desk."

"What rubbish! You have robbed hundreds of men and women."

"That's neither here nor there. It's risky and it's dishonourable. No, we must face it out. Remember, I can compel Bruce and Lemare to hold their tongues."

"But, Dick," Kitty pleaded, "you aren't going to refuse me the key, surely?"

"I promised Dot not to give it up without her permission."

"That was jest, not a promise. Let me explain and——"

"I am sorry but I must refuse." He took her hand. "Now, listen, Kitty——"

"Don't touch me, or I'll scream." She turned to him with passionate tenderness. "Dick, dear, remember what that letter means to me. It's Jim and Jim alone I think of. If Jim discovers——"

"But he won't. Keep calm, please, keep calm."

"No, no"—her earnestness grew—"I can't, I won't run the risk. That letter must be destroyed now—to-night. I tell you no one knows it is there. Jim shall never hear

Tom's lies. He loves me and I love him. His love has made me live again. Shatter his belief in me, and you will ruin me and send him to the devil. He said so—said so himself. Dick, darling, if you have any pity or care for me, you will give me the key."

"But——" He paused.

"Only give it me," she whispered, "and I will do anything you like—go away, never speak to Jim again—anything, anything. I only ask you to let him continue to believe in me, to believe in himself and our love. You have concealed the truth from the innocent Dot. Dick," she slipped to his feet, "I ask it, on my knees, for the sake of the love you have for innocent Dot!"

He was silent, struggling with his conscience.

"You refuse—you, Dick, refuse!" She broke into tears there at his feet, with the lamplight on her hair and shoulders.

"Oh, damn it all, you must have it!" he muttered in a low voice of pain. "Take it, and save yourself if you can."

For a moment she looked up bewildered, then seized the key, flung open the desk, found the letter and began to read it, Dick watching her moodily. For he had broken his bond to the woman whom he loved. "The liar!" Kitty exclaimed indignantly, "oh, the wicked liar!" She turned tenderly and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Your devotion," she whispered, "has saved me. I shall love you for this to the end of my life. How can I ever repay you?"

"Mrs. Barclay," said a voice, terrible in its calm, "take your arm from Mr. Forster's shoulder at once."

They both turned, Kitty with a cry of agony, Dick silent and for the first time in his life not master of himself. Dot! Yes, it was Dot, and her face showed that she had heard Kitty's words—cruel, cruel words—shattering the dreams of innocence, confirming only too surely the suspicions and fears that had tortured, because, alas!

they were true. She advanced in dead silence to the centre of the room. "Thank God!" she said quietly, "I have been permitted to learn the truth before it is too late. There is your ring, Mr. Forster. It is all over between us."

"No, no," Kitty cried, sobbing. "Dot—Miss Wason—you do not understand. Let me explain——"

"I neither desire nor will listen to an explanation from you."

"But you must—you must. This is horrible—unjust. You *shall* listen."

"Mrs. Barclay, if that is your real name," Dot interrupted with great dignity, "you are a guest in this house, and therefore I desire to treat you as a guest deserves. But understand, please, that nothing that you can say is of the slightest use. You will explain, if you wish, to my uncle later, but now you will be good enough to leave this room."

"No, no, not until——"

Dot made a mute appeal to Dick. "Kitty," he pronounced deliberately, and Dot drew a breath of such pain as she thought no woman could ever have felt, "please do what Miss Wason directs."

Kitty very reluctantly moved away, but Dot stopped her. "You will first restore, I beg, the letter you have stolen."

"No, I will not." She fronted her defiantly.

Again that mute appeal. "Kitty," Dick said, "give the letter to Miss Wason."

The letter was silently placed on the table. But at the door Kitty paused. "You are a mad and wicked girl," she cried. "Some day you will bitterly repent the injustice——" and then the tears choked her and she walked out, sobbing.

Dot and Dick faced each other. The man had recovered his self-mastery, the woman had never lost hers.

"Here is your ring," he said; "the other things you shall have back in the morning. Good-night!"

She stood paralysed, a girl in a terrible dream, from which she was awaking with indignation rather than anguish.

"You have nothing to say—to me?" she asked, with an effort.

"What can I say?" he answered gently. "You have already decided. It would be cruel and useless for me to deny what you have seen and heard and believe. In the morning your uncle will learn that our engagement is broken off by your express wish, and I shall leave him to explain it to his friends in any way that he pleases, provided that I alone bear the blame."

"Ah!"—she looked at him with eyes of pain—"and——" But her voice died away.

"I desire to make it quite plain that for what has taken place in this room I, and I alone, am responsible. I do not wish to pain you more than I can help, but," his tones were very firm, "for your sake and for Mrs. Barclay's, I say now that she was here at my request, that of my own free will I broke my word to you and gave her the key of that desk, and"—he paused—"if it had not been for my wish she certainly would not have been here at all."

"And you—you say that to me?"

Dick did not falter. "Justice," he said, "compels me to say it. Mrs. Barclay is absolutely guiltless. The criminal is myself and myself alone. I have done you a wrong, Miss Wason, a great wrong. I will not be guilty of a second crime against a woman who simply obeyed my wishes."

"You are determined to screen her?" she demanded.

"Pardon me, not to screen her, but to protect her when she would be too proud and too generous to protect herself, as she easily could."

Dot's eyes said very clearly that she did not believe him, but even in the height of her anger and her pain she recognised with a thrill of admiration that could not be

checked the unflinching courage and loyalty of this man who had wronged her.

"There is one other matter," he proceeded, "which justice also requires that you should hear first from my lips. This evening your uncle learned that the financier who broke up the White Lead Syndicate, and is therefore responsible for the disaster you have heard of, was none other than myself."

"You?—ah!" She recoiled, struck by a new horror. "It is you who have reduced——"

"Yes, I. My reasons are now irrelevant. The fact is as I have said."

The floor rocked under her feet. The bronze lamp swung to and fro, for in a rush of overpowering thought Dot grasped what this remorseless and unexpected confession meant for her house and herself. The veil with which love won, on false pretences, had blinded her innocence, was wrenched away at last. She saw Dick not as she had believed him to be, but as she had feared, as he was—a heartless, ambitious schemer, who had never loved her, who had planned and executed her uncle's and her brother's ruin, in order that he might purchase with money, and at the price of their shameful silence, the ignorant wife who was necessary for his career.

"If you wish to ask any questions," he proceeded pitilessly, "I will undertake to answer them truly."

"Oh, leave me," she whispered, "leave me."

He took up the letter from the table. "There is this, Miss Wason," he said, "you will have to decide now what must be done with this. Give your brother that letter and you will inflict on him all the pain that I have inflicted on you, the pain of the innocent who discovers the bitterness of deceit. Mrs. Barclay and I wished to spare your brother that."

"Yes," she cried, "you and she would have kept him in ignorance as you have kept me. Oh, it is shameful, shameful!"

"In a woman," he answered, with a sudden sternness, "who truly loved and desired to save the man who also loved her, it seemed to me noble. But the point is, Mrs. Barclay and I have failed. The letter is yours, Miss Wason. You alone now have the right to decide what must be done with it." He paused. "Thank you," he said with an effort, "for bearing with me so long. It is the last time, I assure you, I shall trouble you. I cannot ask for your forgiveness. I do not deserve it. But I can, and do say, that for the wrong I have done in asking for your love, I shall be sorry all my life. Good-night."

And then, without waiting for a reply, which he knew she would not or could not give, he left her.

Dot stood dry-eyed staring at the room, as if she could not believe what she had seen and heard. Then spirit and body sharply gave way, and she buried her head in her arms and sobbed tears of anger, pain and impotent yearning for pity and help. How long passed she did not know, but when at last she had strength to look up, she was aware that Kitty Barclay was standing silently by the fireplace. For one moment her indignation flashed up and hot words were ready to pour forth, but the despair and anguish in the other woman's eyes checked them, for this was a woman as miserable as herself, more miserable indeed, because she was guilty.

"You have come back for that letter," Dot said. "Take it, take it."

"Oh, no," Kitty answered. "The letter is no use to anyone now. Destroying it cannot save me, and cannot save you or your brother."

In a sudden flash Dot seized the letter, tore it in pieces, and flung them on the fire. "What are you here for?" she asked proudly.

"To tell you the truth—about Dick."

"Silence!" Dot commanded.

"No, I will not be silent." She had seized Dot's hand and held her fast. "I am not going to say more than

this. You said you loved him. It is not true. You did not—you did not—you do not love him."

"Let me go." It was an appeal, not an angry command.

"No, not till you have heard the truth. You who promised to marry him, whom he trusted, have believed the worst of him. You have condemned him unheard. You are proud, Miss Wason, proud of your pride, but you are not so proud as he is. And you do not love him as he loved you. And he has scorned to defend himself. He could have proved you unjust, but he would not do it, because he loves you far better than he does himself. Some day you will know the truth, but not from him. Some day you will learn to your shame that the man you have rejected, who obeyed you without a word of protest that might pain you, has worked to save you and yours from disgrace and ruin, has risked life, reputation, fortune, his career, to keep you, as he believed you to be, a trusting, innocent, loving girl. I know these things; you, too, might have known them had you really loved him, really trusted him. Yes, I repeat, you will know them—and it will be too late, too late." She flung her hand away and looked at Dot with eyes of pitying indignation. "Some day you will wish to win back his love, and you will not get it. For your stubborn, unjust heart has lost to-night what was yours, what he had given to no other woman, the faith that he will never be able to recover—his belief that a woman can love as he loved you. That will be your punishment, and it will ruin your life as you have ruined his. But you—you will have deserved it."

Dot had listened with bowed head, and when she looked up Kitty was gone. "Dick, Dick," her heart cried, but she knew that Kitty had spoken truly about one thing. Dick would not come back. He would bear his punishment as she must bear hers, alone and in silence. Backwards and forwards her thoughts and feelings moved in a tumult of pain. He had deceived her, he had done great wrong, he

had never really loved her. Her pride was fierce and strong, her conscience had been cruelly outraged, her confidence shattered. Against the appeal of her heart, ready to forgive if he would only ask for it, beat the elemental instincts of her nature, the deep feeling that he had sinned against the right, and that nothing could atone for that. She must be true to her purest convictions, and if she must suffer, she must suffer. Love was nothing as against the right. Once cease to believe in the dictates of her conscience, and life became a welter of passion in which there was no God and no law. And without God and His laws, inscrutable, eternal, the spiritual crumbled away, conquered and crushed by the carnal and the perishable.

Suddenly she started and listened. Subdued whispers, stifled footfalls in the billiard-room and in the hall. Someone cautiously peered in.

"Dot!" a laughing voice exclaimed with great relief. "Guy, it's only Dot." Her brother entered gaily and flung his revolver on to the table. "And we thought it was a burglar! Dot, you little sinner, what are you doing here?"

Lemare had entered with Jim. Edwardes came in from the billiard-room. Then the men stared at each other and laughed.

"It's all a plant," Jim explained, "but you gave me a real fright. I heard voices in the library, so I stole downstairs and listened. I was right, too. So I went back and hauled Guy and Edwardes out of their beds. We made a cordon; you see we found the outer door of the conservatory unlocked, but the only criminal we have collared is this naughty child."

Edwardes and Lemare, unlike Jim, had been studying Dot, and they were far more frightened than if they had come upon a dozen burglars.

"Own up, Dot," Jim was saying cheerfully. "Why are you here?"

"I—I couldn't sleep, so I thought—I came down to the library to fetch a book."

"As if you hadn't fifty in your room! Lit the lamp, too! and pulled the curtains, I see."

Edwardes whispered to Lemare. "I think we had better all go back to bed," he remarked aloud. "Come along, Wason."

The door was unceremoniously pushed open. Savonarola ran in and sprang up on his mistress.

"Do you know," Jim went on, "I made sure at one time the voices I heard were Dick's and Mrs. Barclay's, but of course——"

"Mrs. Barclay's," Guy exclaimed in angry surprise.

Edwardes gripped his arm sharply. "Hold your tongue, you fool," he whispered.

"Oh, no, no," Dot said in great agitation. "You are mistaken, Jim."

Jim suddenly walked up to her. His tone changed. "I say, little ghost, what's the matter? You have been crying. What was there to cry about?"

"Let us go to bed," Dot said as firmly as she could.

"One second—there's no hurry." His eyes were going over the room. "Hallo! What's this? Uncle Edward's desk open? What have you been doing, Dot?" He wheeled, astonished. "Then Dick has been here," he said slowly. "He had the key—you gave it him the last thing——"

"Dick said he might be working late; he often does," Edwardes hurriedly explained. "Come, it's time we all cleared out."

"Not yet." Jim confronted his sister. "Dick has been here?" he demanded, inspecting her pale face in which her eyes stood out dark and feverishly bright.

"Yes—yes. Dick—Mr. Forster was here, and we——"

"Mr. Forster—no"—he pushed Edwardes back. "I am not going to bed until I have my question answered. There is some mystery here and I have a right to know

what it is. Dot," his tone was grave, but friendly, "why is Dick's ring on the table—the ring you gave him?"

And before she could say a word Savonarola triumphantly pounced on a handkerchief lying by the sofa and brought it with virtuous eyes to Jim.

"This is Mrs. Barclay's handkerchief," he said in a low voice. "Then Kitty—Mrs. Barclay *has* been here?"

"Jim!" Dot tried to snatch it away, while the other two men stared helplessly.

"Dot," he said very deliberately, "you know all the time Dick and Kitty have been here—here alone." A cry of pain was wrung from him. "You found them here?"

"Jim, dear, for God's sake——" poor Dot falteringly implored.

"Answer me. Did you, or did you not, find Kitty and Dick here alone?"

Lemare and Edwardes held their breath. "No," Dot said in a low voice. "No."

Both Lemare and Edwardes were profoundly affected. It was not true, they both knew now, but the sudden fierce chivalry of this girl in whose face the misery of a lost love was written, her effort to spare her brother from the pain she had suffered so recently herself, stirred them to the depths. And it was futile; it must be futile.

"Dot," Jim pleaded, "you are trying to deceive me. But you will not refuse to tell me the truth. Answer me as you love me. Did you or did you not——?"

"No," Dot interrupted, with a great effort. "I did not."

"Very well. I believe you," Jim said simply.

And even Lemare breathed more freely. He was learning this evening and night some things he could wish he had learned years ago.

Dot leaned against the table in silent pain. And then she started with a cry that chilled the blood of those who heard it. They turned awestricken. Kitty was standing

in the doorway, and her face announced that a sister's lie had been told in vain.

"Miss Wason has deceived you, Mr. Wason," she said. "She has not told you the truth. You were quite right. Miss Wason found Mr. Forster and myself alone here."

"Dot!" Jim said, looking at his sister—"Dot!"

"Miss Wason," Kitty went on relentlessly, "has broken off her engagement with Mr. Forster. The time for concealing the truth is past, and I am here to tell it—all of it."

"Ah!" Dot had put her hand to her heart. "Ah!" Jim was just in time to catch her as she fainted.

CHAPTER XXVI

JUSTICE OR GENEROSITY?

THE sundial in the Italian garden, on this fine October morning, indicated that the stable clock would presently strike eleven. Dick, who was slowly pacing to and fro, bareheaded, with his hands behind his back, stopped for a minute to look over the closely-clipped hedge of yew and cypress at the woods—brown, red and yellow—that rose above the lake. Thence his questioning eye travelled up the sunlit lawns to the south front of the Manor and back to this sheltered plateau where a Wason of the eighteenth century, smitten with what he had seen in the south, had wrested from an English landscape his homage to foreign formalism. On the gravelled terrace he could see Savonarola and Romola licking their paws in blissful ignorance just below the oriel window of the library. But the mistress for whom they waited would not come to-day to give them a scamper in the bronzed bracken on which the dew still glistened.

What was he to do now? That was the question that Dick was asking himself. He had resolutely dismissed from his thoughts the purely personal part of the problem. His engagement was irrevocably broken off, and it was idle to debate what this would ultimately mean.

But there remained a very practical and direct question to which some answer must be given to-day—this morning. In an hour or two he would be leaving the Manor for good; before he left, the situation created by the collapse of the White Lead Syndicate must be met. Edward Bruce and Guy Lemare, Jim and Dorothy Wason would shortly be paupers. Ruin and shame hung over the Manor beneath whose walls Romola and Savonarola dozed and snapped at the belated gnats. True, the White Lead

Syndicate would have collapsed in any case sooner or later, but its fall at this moment was primarily due to himself. Kitty was right. It was he, and none other. The morning's post had brought him some news and also a sheaf of business letters. One was in his hand now from his confidential secretary, asking for immediate instructions. That letter must be answered explicitly, and only one person could answer it—Richard Forster. His plan had collapsed as completely as the syndicate. Once he was the husband of Dorothy Wason he had intended to restore the fortunes of the family to the position before Edward Bruce was lured into speculation. The restoration was to be a gift from Dot to her brother, uncle and friend. Dot had brought love into his life; she had brought herself. The pleasure she would have in making this gift; the pleasure he would have in asking her to make it her gift, were as nothing to what she would be giving him. For she was the dowry of a life: a dowry that would, with each year, enrich, strengthen and purify, would multiply a hundredfold the blessings without which life is simply a mechanical process of the senses.

Hence Dick had never for one moment regarded this idea as generous, unselfish or noble. He took no credit for planning it; he would have taken none for carrying it out. From the first he had desired to save Dot: then love had come, and the idea became simply a necessary part of the scheme of life that love imposed, trebly welcome for its own sake and for what it meant in the future. If it deserved any ethical title, "just" was the correct one. It was justice, nothing more, and it left him the debtor—the debtor to Dot. Love, the gift, was also, for them both, love, the debt. But all this was now swept away. What Bruce and Lemare could have taken from Dot, they could not take from the hands of the man from whose life Dot had cut herself off: the man who had wronged her; the man to whom, by his own confession, their ruin was primarily due. To take money from the man who had broken

Dot's heart: who had, put it as you will to the public, inflicted on the Manor the shame of a marriage stopped, within a fortnight of its celebration, was, to any gentleman, absolutely impossible. The Wason who made this Italian garden would have settled the slight on his honour with a gentleman's sword in two minutes, on the turf by the sundial, and Dick felt how much there was to be said for the sword, as the guardian and avenger of a woman's rights. But as the sword was impossible for twentieth-century financiers, what was he to do? Step into his motor and leave things to take their course? To return to work, knowing that in a few weeks the Manor would be sold, Bruce and Lemare adjudicated bankrupts, and Dot a beggar, compelled, perhaps, to take the paltry pittance of the charitable, or to learn the bitterness of the servant's bread in the schoolroom of some starveling from the gutter like himself, who had made wealth, and desired an innocent gentlewoman as a governess for his *parvenu* girls? Dot—his Dot, whom he had faced the gates of hell to keep pure, innocent and happy! Justice! So easy to talk of justice. But when you have settled what is just, life does not always permit you to carry it out. He recalled her words. The laws of right and wrong, God's laws, working in and through those unseen spiritual forces that mould a material world, are inexorable. They are not to be altered because human ambition or mental passion require it; they continue to work, serenely relentless, whether man's unconquerable mind admits their existence, or with humble gratitude acquiesces in their validity. Deny their power and they bind you at every step; obey them and you conceal the proof of their might. Dick had sworn to himself that he would punish the man who would rob him of Dot and of love. The man who had robbed him was himself. The question could not therefore be shirked.

He stared over the cypress hedge at Savvy and Romola and searched for a sign, but there was no sign. A kindly

hand was laid on his shoulder. "They would like to see you, Dick, in the library," Arthur Edwardes said. The two men turned and walked in silence. Edwardes slipped his arm into his friend's. "Be generous," he said. "You will not regret it."

Forster made an impatient move of his head. Not that he resented the gentle advice, but it was so inadequate. It was not a question of generosity, but of justice. Yet Gertrude Wyatt had said exactly the same. She had left that morning in company with Kitty. Of Gertrude's share in the catastrophe neither Dick nor Kitty had any idea. That Gertrude had, through Guy Lemare and Steer, brought Tom Hennessy back from Buenos Ayres, had persuaded him to write to Mr. Bruce a letter that he would never read, that she had informed Kitty of the existence of that letter, and had made it easy for her, with Dick's help to destroy it, that she had subtly prepared Dot's mind for a cruel discovery, and, finally, when she had satisfied herself that Dick and Kitty were alone in the library, had sent Dot down to discover them together—of this simple and finely-executed plot to achieve her ends, Dick was ignorant, and Kitty, who alone might have guessed it, had quite failed to do so.

Both Dick and Kitty therefore had been deeply touched by her act of friendship this morning. With quiet courage she had offered Kitty her company back to London, and she had done it with the deliberate knowledge that by so doing she was probably breaking openly with the Wasons, with Mr. Bruce and Mrs. Ottoway. She was, in short, taking the side of Richard Forster. But Gertrude did not flinch. Dick was free—his marriage was irrevocably broken off. Her task henceforward was to convince the man she loved that time could heal the blow, could give him a greater and more satisfying happiness than the happiness he had lost. It was a stroke indeed of generous genius, but she could afford to be generous. And her love for this man atoned in her eyes for the cold-blooded way

in which she had schemed so successfully to frustrate his marriage. Cold-blooded it seemed, but if her brain devised the means, passion inspired the end. She honestly believed his feeling for Dot to be a mere transient affection; she was honestly convinced she could enable Dick to achieve a career, worthy of his ambition and hers, and that no other woman could. She had made it her life's work to help him to become great and her reward was simply to be himself. To women who would aid her and him she was willing enough to be generous, even grateful. Kitty had helped him in the past; therefore she would stand by Kitty now. And when she had ten minutes' talk with Dick in the garden, she, too, had quietly urged him to be generous. Yet she had come away not quite satisfied. Neither of them, of course, had mentioned Dot's name, but the mind will say, through the eyes, truths that cannot be put into words. It is there that the thoughts that lie too deep for tears are written for those to read who can understand the workings of the spirit. That look of silent suffering made Gertrude angry. It hurt her; made her feel hot with resentment that any woman should be able to inflict such pain on the man she loved.

Violet met the two men on the terrace and walked with them to the house. At the door her husband looked questioningly at her.

"No use," she whispered; "an angel wouldn't move her."

"Well, well"—he patted her hair—"as the only angel we have on the premises has tried and failed, you must be right."

In the library Edward Bruce, Jim, Guy Lemare and Mrs. Ottoway were waiting for Dick. Clearly some important business required to be discussed.

"I shouldn't have troubled you again," Bruce began, "but I have had a telegram this morning which no one here can explain."

Dick took the paper from him and read—

"All charges against Mrs. Barclay withdrawn. Letter follows.—HENNESSY."

"Yes, I can explain it," he said at once. "It refers, I am sure, to a letter which, I have been informed by Mrs. Barclay, was destroyed by Miss Wason last night. I never saw the letter myself, so I cannot say what the charges are that are now withdrawn."

He handed back the telegram. Mrs. Ottoway promptly broke the silence. "Mr. Hennessy," she said, "is Mrs. Barclay's husband, is he not?"

"Oh, no," Dick replied.

Jim had sprung to his feet; Lemare uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Mr. Hennessy," Dick said, "married Mrs. Barclay in New York under circumstances that probably Sir Guy Lemare has been able to explain, more or less fully. But she subsequently discovered that Mr. Hennessy had already been married to a woman in this country, who is still living. He had deserted his first wife, leaving her to starve until Mrs. Barclay provided for her. Hennessy has as much right to interfere in Mrs. Barclay's affairs as in yours, Mrs. Ottoway. And if Mrs. Barclay had chosen to take revenge on the drunkard who had wronged her, Hennessy would now be in prison for bigamy as well as some other things."

"And the proof of all this?" Mrs. Ottoway asked frigidly.

Dick's gaze rested on her for a minute. "He has bolted," he said, "because there is a warrant out for his arrest. The proofs are with my solicitors, who will produce them when the law requires."

"Then," Mrs. Ottoway remarked, "Mrs. Barclay has——"

"No," Dick's eye had begun to flash. "I am solely

responsible. Hennessy got a cheque cashed in New York on which he had forged my signature. Sir Guy Lemare, Mrs. Ottoway, will tell you who introduced him to the bank through which the cheque was cashed."

"I had no idea," Guy protested contritely, "on my honour I had no idea that——"

"Mrs. Barclay and I are quite satisfied, Sir Guy," Dick interrupted quietly, "that you were ignorant. I could wish that you had been Hennessy's first victim; I hope you will be the last. Neither he nor his, however, will trouble us any more, I fancy."

Guy had risen. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Forster——" he began, holding out a hand.

"Thank you, but I think not. We are all of us liable to be taken in by plausible scoundrels. If an apology is owing to anyone it is to Mrs. Barclay, but I must leave that to you. I have neither right nor wish to interfere with your judgment in a matter that no longer is of any importance to any of us here." He paused and looked round the room. "But there is a question on which, with your permission, I will gladly ask your advice."

At their invitation he sat down and explained as briefly as he could the financial situation from his point of view, and then curtly, without mentioning Dot's name more than once, stated how he had proposed to meet it, winding up with expressing a wish that he would like to carry out his original intention.

"In plain words," Mrs. Ottoway summed it up, "having brought ruin on my brother and Sir Guy, you now wish to repair that ruin."

Dick bowed in silence.

"This is very generous, very generous indeed," Edward Bruce said slowly. "The proposal comes to me as a complete surprise. You will not misunderstand me when I say that under the circumstances I do not think I can accept what is really a very large gift. At least I must have time to consider it."

"You express my feeling exactly," Lemare added at once.

"I have no wish to be generous," Dick replied quickly, "but I do wish to be just. I ask you, before you finally decline, to weigh as carefully as you can the reasons and motives that have urged me to speak so frankly. And," he hesitated, "I wish to add that in any case Miss Wason must give her consent. If she disapproves, I withdraw at once."

"Yes," Guy said, "it is imperative we should know what Dot feels. I agree with Mr. Forster that if she disapproves we cannot consider his generous offer for a moment. Of course, her approval would not bind us to accept."

"Certainly not," Dick replied.

"And you, Jim?" Bruce inquired.

"Let me hear first what Dot says," he answered.

"Shall I ask Dot to come?" Violet asked. She had been sitting in the back of the room, taking no part, save to watch the speakers with rapt interest, and occasionally to whisper a word to her husband.

When Dot entered Dick just flashed one glance at her pale face as if he would read in her eyes a reply to a question that had been long in his own mind—the solution, if possible, of a tremendous problem with which he wrestled. She went very calmly to the oriel window and sat down, with Violet beside her, but between her and Dick, so that he could not see her nor she him. She, too, had just flashed one glance round the room, but she betrayed no emotion, and her eyes were fixed on her brother. This was a woman who feared alone the voice from within.

Lemare, after a pause, explained why she was summoned, and then they all prepared to wait for her answer, but Dick interrupted the silence for a minute.

"I desire," he said, "to make it quite clear that this question stands entirely by itself. Whichever way it is decided cannot affect in the slightest degree decisions that

have been already taken and accepted by everyone in this room. The point that Sir Guy Lemare has stated, at my request, is simply a matter of justice on which Mr. Bruce and he, as well as myself, desire to have Miss Wason's opinion. We are all agreed that without her consent nothing can be done, but her decision will only bind herself."

"Yes, that is so," Edward Bruce said.

"May I ask," Dot began, speaking with an effort—"may I ask if you accept, Uncle Edward, things will be as if there had been no syndicate?"

"I shall be, I believe, where I was six months ago."

"And Guy the same?"

"Yes," said Guy, "the same so far as money goes."

"And you, Jim?"

"Leave me out, please," Jim retorted curtly, and they all stared in intense surprise.

"And," Dot went on, "if we don't accept, we are all paupers."

No one replied. The silence was a sufficient answer.

"It is, you say, a question of justice," Dot said quietly. "I cannot settle questions of justice for others." Dick suddenly shifted in his chair. Violet saw the lines round his mouth tighten. "But I can say what I feel and think."

"That is what we want, my dear," Bruce interposed.

Dot looked at him. "Uncle Edward," she said in a low voice, "in speculating with my money and Jim's, either you did wrong or you did not. If you did wrong, then neither you nor anyone else has any right to take again what you lost by gambling except as a gift of charity."

"But, my dear——" Bruce protested, though he failed to meet his niece's searching gaze.

"If," Dot interrupted him with gentle firmness—"if Mr. Forster in ruining the White Lead Syndicate did right, then he is wrong in trying to avert the punishment that must fall on those who have done wrong. If he was

wrong in ruining the syndicate, he cannot make it right now by simply making good what has been lost by his acts." She paused. "But I am only a girl," she added. "I know nothing about the White Lead Syndicate except that it has failed, and that Jim's and my money have disappeared with it. I therefore only say what I feel."

No one spoke for some minutes.

"You have not helped us very much, Dot," Bruce said. "Guy and I, above all, wish to know whether you disapprove of our accepting."

Dot's fingers twisted in her lap. "I cannot say," she answered slowly. "If I assent, you are saved from bankruptcy and disgrace; if I do not, you are ruined. It is not fair to expect me to decide such a question for those whom I love."

"Pass us over," Guy suggested gently. "Will you accept for yourself and leave us to decide for ourselves?"

"Guy," she said, "you must not be influenced by my decision. But"—her voice dropped—"I cannot accept for myself: no, not one penny. I am different, very different from you," she added in a pathetic whisper.

"May I remind you, Dorothy," Mrs. Ottoway said, "that this is not wholly a matter for you, nor even for your uncle? There is Jim."

"Well, Jim, what do you say?" Bruce turned somewhat wearily to his nephew.

Jim rose very calmly. "Dick," he said, and a thrill went through them all. Dot's hands clasped in her lap involuntarily. "Dick, you say it is a matter of justice, not of generosity. As a matter of justice you don't owe me a penny. As a matter of generosity, if you are good enough to save my Manor House from going to the auctioneers, my uncle from the bankruptcy court and my aunt from living at the lodge gates, I say at once I thank you from the bottom of my heart. This house means something to us all—it means everything to me. It has been in my family for four hundred years, and I don't want

to see it go from the Wasons. If it was only myself, things would, perhaps, be different. But there will be Wasons to come after me, I hope. I have no right to sacrifice them, for I am to blame as much as Uncle Edward. Yes, I am. So I say, if your offer still holds good, I accept, with gratitude. But you, Dick, will understand when I add that I take your money in the same spirit as you propose it. Give me a chance to pay you back—not in money, but by showing you some day in the future that though I don't deserve your kindness now, I must work my best to deserve it. Is that a bargain?" He held out his hand.

Dick stumbled to his feet. His emotion had mastered him. For the second time in his life he had lost his self-possession.

"Jim," he muttered huskily, and their hands met. "Jim, I thank you." Then he turned quickly to Bruce and Lemare. "If," he said, with a growing confidence, "if I undertake to do what is just to the best of my judgment, will you accept my decision?"

"Certainly, certainly," both replied, for they were no little touched, "we are quite content to leave the decision as to what is just entirely in your hands."

There was a long pause. Dot had thrown one glance at her brother when he was speaking. When Dick and Jim had sealed their bargain she had moved as if she would interrupt, but by a great effort she checked herself. And now she looked resolutely out at the window, but her hand had closed on Violet's wrist, in a silent pathetic appeal for help and comfort, which Violet alone in the room felt and understood.

"And Miss Wason?" Dick questioned slowly—timidly. "Will she accept also?"

Violet felt the cold fingers on her wrist tighten convulsively. "If"—Dot did not dare to look round—"if Mr. Forster will promise not to be generous, but simply to be just"—she paused, seeking not so much for the words

as the strength to utter them—"to do what his conscience bids without fear"—she stole one fleeting look and it very nearly unnerved her—"I will accept"—her voice almost died away—"his decision."

Dick, too, did not dare to look, but at her words his eyes suddenly lit up. "I promise," he said very quietly, but very firmly, and turned away almost brusquely. Face and bearing revealed that he knew at last what he must do. But suddenly he wheeled. "Thank you, Miss Wason," and he could not keep a note of deep tenderness, of passionate loyalty from beautifying the conventional utterance, "thank you."

He bowed to the others with his self-taught self-mastery, and walked out.

No one spoke. Lemare, after a hurried glance at Dot, alone attempted to relieve his feelings by tearing up the telegram from Tom Hennessy.

"I am quite sure," Mrs. Ottoway suddenly remarked in her slightly acid staccato, "that it is not just I should live at the lodge gates. But men's ideas of justice are very different from women's and"—she eyed her brother with some pity but more contempt—"if magistrates who make an error of judgment are to be punished by having to go to prison, and bring ruin on their innocent sisters, there would not be a judge left on the bench."

Dot found herself alone with Violet. "Don't leave me, Vi," she pleaded brokenly; "don't go away for a day or two. I cannot live in the Manor alone."

Violet kissed her. "No, dear, I am not going away just yet. You will be more alone in a day or two than you are now." Dot looked up at her with fresh perplexity and fear. "You are a brave girl, Dot," she added slowly, "a very brave girl, but you are not half as brave as he is"—a remark even more enigmatical than her first puzzling reply.

In the hall her husband was waiting for her.

"He loves her," she said serenely. "I doubted it be-

fore, but I don't doubt it now. He loves her, so there is still hope."

Edwardes growled inarticulately, perhaps because he was convinced no one but a man could really understand and appreciate Richard Forster. "How so?" he demanded, as his wife offered no explanation.

"Because," she replied, "he will do now what love, not justice, requires. I am a woman, Arthur, and therefore I believe in love more than in justice."

"Dot," he retorted drily, "happens to be a woman, too."

"Of course. She has been fighting this morning a cruel battle between a girl's conscience and a woman's love. Some day she will learn that for a woman they ought to be, must be, one and the same. I hope it will not be too late."

"Too late for what?"

But Violet only smiled that restful smile of hers.

"You don't understand Dick," he retorted, with a flash of irritation.

"No, I don't know your Dick," she answered. "But there was born a new Richard Forster a quarter of an hour ago, and that is the Richard Forster with whom we shall have to deal in the future."

CHAPTER XXVII

A FINANCIER'S JUSTICE

THREE days passed, but Dick made no sign of answering Dot's request that in determining what was just he should listen to the appeal of his conscience alone. And in three days, as will happen, things at the Manor House began slowly to return to their normal course. County society inevitably had been first astounded, then excited, and finally perplexed. On the eve of its celebration Miss Wason's wedding, which was to be the event of the autumn, had suddenly been postponed: her engagement definitely broken off. The invitations were cancelled, the presents returned. Every cause, probable or improbable, was assigned, and the gossip-mongers were provided with a topic that would keep them busy till Christmas. In the language of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, if they could suggest "no exquisite reason for it," they "had reason good enough." But all that was actually known was the brief but proud statement that the engagement was terminated by Miss Wason with the approval of her trustees. Nor could either friends or gossip-mongers learn anything more explicit. Those who attempted, clumsily or delicately, to get behind the bare fact, found themselves met with a polite but chilling reserve, and the reserve was made possible by the comforting knowledge that apart from scandal or sheer fiction, the real reasons were and could be kept a secret. The actors in the drama alone possessed the truth, and the actors had every motive apart from pride to prevent the truth becoming a topic for the tea-table and the servants' hall. It was particularly disappointing to the inquisitive to discover that Arthur and Violet Edwardes, Gertrude Wyatt and Sir Guy Lemare were as staunch allies in the conspiracy of silence as Mrs. Ottoway and

Jim Wason. From Gertrude this attitude was both annoying and disconcerting, because she intimated that both Richard Forster and Dorothy Wason were her friends: that she knew their reasons perfectly well—and then she would proceed mercilessly to snub anyone who expected her to communicate them, still less to judge them.

"My dear mamma"—she answered a querulous question—"great as the pleasure always is of betraying one friend to the disadvantage of another, I propose to defer it for a time. Those women this afternoon were ridiculous. A month ago they did nothing but bleat about the unsuitability of a baby marrying a hardened man of the world, and now that the baby has apparently discovered the unsuitability they cannot be content with the joy of saying, 'Did I not say so?' but must abuse the baby for having the courage to agree with them."

At the Manor itself the subject was tacitly buried. Mrs. Ottoway took refuge in pride tempered by acidity. Jim had resumed his daily journey to the city, having firmly shown that he would not permit his plans either to be altered or discussed. Edward Bruce slowly recovered his unquenchable optimism. Though he did not dare to say so, Bruce felt that Dot had behaved just a little quixotically. The Wason strain always had that idealist weakness, very admirable in a woman but quite impracticable in the affairs of a common-sense world. And Forster really had showed extraordinary—quite extraordinary—generosity. His conduct in regard to the syndicate was, to be sure, absolutely inexcusable; for Bruce refused to admit that the White Lead scheme was foredoomed to failure. Even now at the eleventh hour Edward Bruce cherished the delusion that Forster's success was only an incident in the campaign, and that by one of those miracles that in the modern world of uniform cause and effect the Stock Exchange alone seems able to provide, defeat might yet be turned into victory. Lemare and his broker, however, laughed scornfully—the broker in particular.

"My dear Mr. Bruce, you may as well expect to see Queen Anne come to life again. When Richard Forster breaks a syndicate he breaks it, and the pieces are not fit for the scrap heap. And remember he has other people's money to think of as well as his own. He is not in business for health and charity."

Nevertheless Mr. Bruce was right. The miracle happened.

"Have you heard the news, Elsa?" her brother demanded, beaming, at tea-time. "The syndicate is on its legs again and booming—booming is a mild word. I had a telegram at midday, but could not believe it. But Jim, who has come down early, confirms it up to the hilt. Just as the smash did, so the boom has begun in New York, and when Jim left the city they were so excited that they were going on 'in the street,' and he says they will go on probably till seven at least." He sipped his tea, adding lump after lump of sugar because he did not know what he was doing.

"How long will it last?" Mrs. Ottoway inquired, soaking a rusk in cream for her pug. "Fortunately you can't be ruined more than you are already, Edward, and you have no money to gamble with, else Guy and you would be asking that financier to help you again. Shall I ring for more sugar? We shall want it if you have a second cup."

"Oh, it will last this time." He rubbed his hands gleefully.

"The sugar or the boom?" She wiped the pug's creamy lips. "You may be sure it's only another clever trap."

Nothing but the marvellous revival of the syndicate was talked of for the next half-hour. Violet plied Jim with eager questions, and Edward Bruce walked up and down the room, munching slice after slice of cake between his rapid comments. Dot alone neither asked questions nor listened to answers. After a few minutes she took up a magazine and ensconced herself in the window, for her

family had suddenly forgotten their self-imposed rule not to speak of Richard Forster in her presence. The magazine was apparently so engrossing that her cup remained untasted at her side; yet not a page of the magazine was turned: Dot was staring out at the dusk falling on the terrace and the shivering trees by the lake.

"Well, well," her uncle was saying, "the amateur is going to be justified after all. We country squires are not such fools as the professionals think us, and I always felt that those proceedings against the legality of the concession were mere bluff and would have to be withdrawn. Justice is too strong for the financiers, as it is for everyone. But I am afraid from what you say, Jim, that all this will be serious for"—he glanced at Dot—"very serious for Forster."

Jim agreed.

"Of course, the unsuccessful speculator is a very bad candidate, very bad indeed. What's that? Forster will probably lose every penny he has? He has my sympathy, on that one point alone, I need not say; but it will be quite temporary. These great speculators, particularly the American ones, have their ups and downs. In a few years he will be up again no doubt." He had finished the cake. "Excellent stuff that, Elsa. You might say a word to the cook. A nice light hand in her cakes and omelettes, heavy in her soups, don't you think? Forster, perhaps, may need a little help to tide him over. I must talk to Guy about it. I should welcome the opportunity of showing him that others can be generous as well as himself—not generous, just was the word—of course as a pure matter of business, pure finance only. I might write him a letter. What do you say, Jim?"

"I should wait, Uncle Edward."

"Well, I'll discuss the idea with Guy. A joint letter from us both, an affair of strict justice—strict justice. If you put it properly, business can always be kept as business."

Dot was gliding quietly towards the door.

"You look tired, my dear," Bruce said in his kindliest way. "You walk too much. Those dogs impose on you. You should remember you are only a girl and the fields are getting heavy going for skirts. You didn't try the cake, did you? Ah, that's perhaps wise"—he patted her cheek—"as I'm afraid I have either eaten too much, or it was not as light as I thought. Don't"—he turned to his sister—"don't speak to the cook, Elsa, till I see how I digest it."

A ghostly little smile flickered over Dot's pale face. She slipped out into the cool shadows of the hall, where she suddenly stopped with her hand on her breast as if a sharp pain had stabbed her. How lonely, how cruelly lonely the Manor was.

"Dot wants brisking up, poor child," her uncle remarked; "a little run to Venice or the Riviera would do her and me good. I must talk to Guy about that too. No, Violet, I don't agree; Florence would not be the thing at all. She wants colour—Venetian colour, blood and warmth. The Tuscan Pre-Raphaelites are so unhealthy, particularly in November. Now, Titian and Tintoretto are always real tonics."

Upstairs in her room Dot found everything that was cheerful: a bright fire, flowers in every corner, Savvy and Romola ready to nestle into the folds of her dress. Everyone, in fact, secretly conspired to do some little service in silence for her. The head gardener sacrificed his choicest hothouse blooms; Violet arranged them. Jim was always bringing books and placing them where they would catch her eye. Her maid tried to entice her with her daintiest frocks. Even Aunt Elsa had been detected encouraging Romola to go upstairs and romp with her mistress—an amazing concession from a lady whose strongest conviction was that no dog, save a pug, should be seen beyond the stable court. And all this kindness for their jealously-guarded treasure only made her more sad. For Violet was

right. Dot was tortured night and day with the battle between her conscience and her love. And how deeply she had loved Dick she only discovered when she had torn him out of her life. This evening she could not endure it. She must find Jim and persuade him to answer the questions that the terrible news had forced on her.

Her brother, who was in the library smoking in front of the fire in the dim October dusk, started when he saw the slim ghost steal in to her favourite place by the cushion on the hearth—"Miss Dot's cushion," as the maids called it. How many hours had she not dreamed away in the flicker of the flames, or passed in discussing the future—hers and his—with her brother. For they understood each other, these two, though they never agreed.

"Will he really be ruined?" Dot asked abruptly.

Jim looked at the bowl of his pipe. "Yes," he said, "he will be a pauper."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, either he had to smash the syndicate or the syndicate had to smash him. His enemies had arranged he must either win again or lose all he had. And now he has lost."

"It's not then what Aunt Elsa called a flash in the pan?"

"Oh, no. It's suicide, financial suicide, pure and simple. He had his enemies under his feet—they knew it, everyone in the city knew it. But yesterday, apparently, all the wonderful measures by which he won his victory were suddenly countermanded. Dick, of course, hasn't said a word to me, not a syllable. The office knows the truth, however, and they think he has gone mad. But he is as sane as I am. He has deliberately cut his throat, so to speak."

Dot was staring into the fire. "I guessed that," she whispered. A long pause. "Others, I suppose," she remarked at last, "will suffer too. That is hard for them, is it not?"

"No"—Jim leaned forward—"no one will lose a sixpence. Dick has sacrificed his whole fortune to be sure that not one single man or woman shall be the loser by his act. And when the last cheque has been passed he will not have a penny, I believe." He, too, paused. "He is a just man, and a brave one, is Richard Forster."

Dot shivered by the fire.

"You know what the consequences will be," Jim went on. "You will be a rich, a very rich woman, Dot. I have worked out the figures with Uncle Edward. Your fifty thousand pounds will come back to you presently as half a million at least."

"And you will be rich, too," she said quickly, as if the thought gave her some comfort.

"I don't touch a penny of it, not one farthing," he answered. And Dot looked at him with fear and trembling. "Dick, you will remember, offered to give me my fifty thousand back. I accepted that as a generous gift. But not one halfpenny above that sum do I touch. The odd four hundred thousand will be added to yours, Dot—that's about a million in all. And you'll have to take it, because you solemnly promised to accept what Dick decided would be just. You appealed to his conscience and this is what his conscience has done. Uncle Edward may flatter himself on his skill. It is sheer nonsense. Dick has convinced himself he did wrong, and he has put the wrong right in the only way he could—by ruining himself."

"Was there no other way?" Dot asked helplessly. "Surely there was——"

"None. I saw that in this room from the first. It's the greatest and biggest thing I have ever heard of. But then Dick—you must let me say it, Dot—is the greatest and biggest man I am ever likely to meet." Her silence and the wistful clasping of her hands betrayed the deep emotion his words had caused.

"And what will he do now?" she asked, after another pause.

"Ah," Jim leaned back in his chair, "who can say? Beggars, you know——"

"But he can work," she interrupted feverishly. "He——"

"Work?" Jim mused. "A man like Dick works when he has something great to work for. He never cared for money, for money's sake: to-day has proved it; and his political career is now at an end. Of course he won't starve; but it's my belief that he has done with finance for ever, and if he has done with finance, he has done with everything."

Dot said nothing. She had shrank back into the darkest corner, where she sat with her hands about her knees, gazing at the oriel window and the witchery of the shadows on the oak floor. How pitiless was Fate, how pitiless and cruel! Ah, if she had only understood what the appeal to justice would and must mean. But Destiny, with inhuman indifference, had so arranged the terrible alternatives that either she and her house must suffer ruin, or that this man's career must be wrecked. He could only do what was just by reversing all that he had done, by permitting the syndicate to come to life again, by removing every obstacle to its success and by inviting it to crush him as it had originally intended to do. Had she consented as Jim had done to accept a generous gift, she would have been saved, her uncle would have been saved too, and Dick would have remained the triumphant victor he had fought to be; he would have been able to realise all the ambitions, the great and noble ambitions, that were to be the life he dreamed of in the sphere of politics. Was she right in refusing, right in insisting that justice, and justice alone, would satisfy? Four days ago in this room she had had no doubt. He had deceived her. She had found him in the library under circumstances which condemned him beyond appeal. To her uncle he had, by

obstinate silence, virtually admitted his guilt, and had persisted in shielding the woman once her friend, who had deceived her so cruelly too. Both to her uncle and herself he had confessed to ruining the syndicate: in other words, to having deliberately planned to place them in a position in which they must either accept his terms or face poverty and disgrace. Things, she had always firmly believed, were either right or wrong in themselves, apart from their consequences, apart from their motives or objects. But was that the truth, the truth of God's laws, of God Himself? Now that the consequences were to be seen, could she honestly say they made no difference?

She brushed the question away. It was too hard. In this world where men and women could only see as in a glass darkly, could only grope in the warring chaos of the flesh and the spirit, in the eternal fight between the heart that cried for love, and the conscience that yearned for justice, how was a girl to decide? Follow her conscience, be the results what they would? Surely, surely that might entail suffering too deep and exquisite for a human soul to endure. Follow her heart? Ah, yes, but the heart so often only registered the passions of the earthly, the physical, the perishable! Had she listened to her heart alone, she would have allowed Dick to take her in his arms and find forgiveness, if only he would promise she should be his wife: that they two should be one flesh while life lasted. But against that surrender had rebelled every instinct of the spirit, and to barter the truths of the spirit, her faith in God and the world to come, for a brief happiness what made life itself a trust from the Divine to the human was impossible, yes, impossible, absolutely impossible.

She was alone, but—ah! so was Dick. She could only think of him—him in his loneliness as he was now. What it must have cost him to do this. He had surrendered of his own free will to his enemies, the men whom he had beaten, the men who had planned his ruin. That was

bitter, very bitter to a proud and conquering man. He was penniless. To-day and to-morrow his name would be a byword, an easy text with which the moralist would point the trite lessons of the trite. The world would neither understand nor appreciate his motives. They would only see in him one more example of the incompetent gambler ruined by his own greed. And his political career was at an end. Politicians and electors in England would have nothing to say to a bankrupt speculator who had, moreover, proved his incapacity by his failure. The wreck of a great career, the loss to a state—to humanity—of brains willing and able to do it service, the unjust stigma on the man himself—for Dick who had done this act of justice in silence would never confess or let the world know the truth, because that would mar its meaning and its worth—that was his punishment, inflicted on himself by himself in obedience to justice. And she was responsible. Responsible? Ah, yes. Yet she could do nothing—nothing. There was no act of justice by which she too could make reparation. What use was her love now? Even if she could conquer her pride, beat down the instincts that told her she had been wronged, her love was no use. Dick loved her no longer, even if he had ever loved her. Yes, he must hope to find comfort and the healing of his wounds in the love of some other woman, and he would find it. Find it, dear God, for there were many women, and good women, who believed that love was better than justice, who believed that for the woman and for the man too, in the baffling riddle of life, that love was justice and justice love. Love, the Judge.

"There is one other person"—Jim broke the silence—"I must mention—Kitty."

Dot's face grew stern.

"You have been to see her?" she asked in a hard voice.

"Yes." His voice was as inflexible as her own. "We have all been unjust to her. I am going to tell you her story because it is my duty."

"I would rather not hear it," she answered, drawing herself up coldly.

"But I insist." And Dot went back haughtily to her cushion. "Kitty's maiden name was Fox. She was the daughter of a rich restaurant-keeper in New York. As a young girl she met in her father's restaurant a rich and well-born man, Tom Hennessy by name—a friend once, but no longer, of Guy's. Hennessy had been expelled from Oxford with good reason. He had been the ruin of more than one trusting woman: he was a gambler and a libertine. She did not know it, and he treated Kitty as many an innocent girl has been treated by gamblers and libertines, and then her father turned her adrift. Dick, whose friend she had been when he was poor and she was well off, compelled Hennessy to marry her. Before long he had gambled away his last penny and took to drink, and Kitty kept her husband, as she believed him to be, and herself from starvation—by working, as she could. There was no one to help her. They had left America, and she was too proud, too conscious of the degradation that sot had brought upon her, to appeal even to Dick. And Dick was in South America, far away, and ignorant of what had become of her."

He paused. Dot stared into the fire in silence.

"What those six years were to her you and I, who have never known poverty shared with a drunkard, cannot even guess. She cannot speak of them. They are too bitter. At Oxford, where she and Hennessy finally came to live, Dick found her when at last he had made himself rich: found her after six months' search. He had discovered that Hennessy was not her husband at all. The scoundrel had a wife whom he had deserted living in this country. Dick did what I or any other honourable man would have done. He took Kitty away from one who had no claim, legal or moral, upon her, but for Kitty's sake and at her request he let the sot go free, insisting only that the past should be buried and that the ruffian should cease to

trouble the woman he had wronged. "If," Jim said, "that was not right, then there is no right in the world at all."

"But she took Mr. Forster's money?" Dot asked.

"Yes. I know from Dick, not from her, that years ago she pawned her last trinket in New York to give the friend, whose greatness she alone had divined, some money he sorely needed, and with that money he took his first step upwards. He would have been a cur had he not in his day of wealth done everything for her. Kitty accepted his money, not as an act of justice, but as I accepted it, as the charity of a loyal friend. She is not the only person to whom Richard Forster has been generous and asked for nothing in return but friendship. Violet can say something about that. There are a dozen others in the city to-day: there is one in this room." He paused and mastered his emotion. "But Kitty needs his money no longer. Her father repented of his unjust cruelty and left her more than three thousand a year. That was some years ago, but it is only in the last few weeks that she has proved her right to inherit it." His voice quivered. "It was her intention," he proceeded, "had I not accepted Dick's offer, to buy the Manor and as much of my land as she could"—his voice broke, but he finished the sentence—"and keep it for me, because—she loves me."

Dot took his hand suddenly. "Jim, Jim, why did she not tell me—you—all this?"

"Because she was too proud—too proud, and too ashamed. She wanted to spare you the truth."

"Then she was afraid of the truth?"

"Only for herself: never for Dick, never."

Dot sank back on her cushion. The conviction in her brother's voice brought her a wonderful comfort and a cruel remorse.

"Wait," Jim said, "there is something more. Twice when she might have married an honest man, Hennessy discovered it and frustrated it by writing mainly lies. The

third time was the letter he wrote to Uncle Edward. It was her desire to spare me which brought her to the library that night." He stopped, for he did not wish to pain her more than he could help.

"My God!" she whispered with a dry sob. She buried her face in her hands.

"I know the truth now"—he rose and spoke with slow deliberation—"the whole truth, and one day—one day, yes, she will be my wife."

"Jim!" she caught at his arm, perplexed.

"Not yet," he said; "two conditions must be fulfilled. The first is mine. Until I have proved that I am worthy of her by showing that I deserve Dick's generosity, I wait. A man must not only win a woman's love, he must be fit to keep it."

"And the second?" Dot asked eagerly.

"Is Kitty's," he answered gently. "She told me yesterday that years ago she had forfeited a woman's right to a man's love, and that only the forgiveness of her innocent sisters can restore it. When"—he placed his hand on her shoulder—"when you, Dot, give her your permission from your own lips, she will marry me. Kitty knows," he added with a quiet pride, "that you will never do that, because I am your brother, but only if you believe it to be right; and I know that if you can forgive her she will be fit to live here, where"—his eye sought the portraits on the walls—"the women of my house have lived to bring up their daughters to fear only God and their consciences."

"Jim," she whispered, putting her arms round his neck, "dear, dear Jim, all that I have now in the world to love, I will try to do what is right, but be patient with me."

He kissed her for answer—a brother's kiss of perfect trust—and for some minutes they stood happy in their unhappiness in the dusk of that library, where so many Wasons had sat and talked of the things in life that really matter.

The gong sounded to dress for dinner. As he moved away Dot stopped him. "Why, why," she asked passionately, "did he do it?"

Jim turned and faced her. "I can only say what I think," he said simply, and Dot waited, pale and anxious. "Because he loved you better than he loves justice." And when he looked back from the door she had returned to her cushion with weary, hopeless resignation.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE REWARD OF AMBITION

"YES, that is all," Dick wound up, running his fingers through the file of papers. "We've pretty well mopped up now."

He and his confidential secretary were sitting in the parlour of the small flat in Bloomsbury, which Kitty had so often railed at as a workhouse-cell, and which was all that Richard Forster, financier, had ever occupied. The room was lined with books, whose arrangement and outward appearance told the eye of experience that they were not there for ornament, and the many curious, who had inspected them, found that, while there was a fine section of the standard works on banking, finance and mining, the greater part was wholly given over to philosophy and poetry, the volumes of which were copiously marked with pencil, and frequently indexed by an expert hand in the science of the ledger. A photograph of Kitty and two pictures, one a characteristically exquisite landscape in oils by Daubigny, the other a water-colour by Wilson Steer, were the only concessions to luxury that the room revealed, but a blank on the wall and another on the large desk showed where Dot's face had dominated the room.

"The staff are all provided with new places," the secretary said, after a pause. "I shall pay them, in addition to what is due to date, the year's salary that you have so generously granted them. As you won't come, sir, to the office to receive their thanks, they have asked me——"

"That's all right," Dick interrupted. "Tell them that if they only do for their new employers what they have done for me"—he smiled—"I shan't be accused of lying in

my testimonials. By the way, you have accepted that post, of course?"

"Not yet, sir." The secretary hesitated. "I thought, perhaps, that you might still want—I would take any pay you can afford. I'm a single man, you see, and I've saved a bit——"

"Now don't be a fool," Dick said, putting a kindly hand on his shoulder. "The place is a thousand a year, and you're worth it. I can't afford you even a hundred a year." He laughed gently. "A single man, yes—but what about Cicely?"

Cicely Evans was his confidential stenographer and typist, whom he had discovered and trained himself. The secretary blushed. "I had no idea, sir, that you——" he broke off, for Dick was smiling. "Miss Evans, too, is quite willing to wait. She vows she won't work for anyone else, and she is a woman of her word."

"Then take her at her word," Dick rejoined promptly. "A girl who is the daughter of a parson ought never to be in the city. It's your privilege to remove her out of it, and see that she doesn't work for anyone else but her husband. Go and do your duty to her, me and yourself." He walked across the room. "And," he said, taking down the Daubigny, "as I shall not be in England when you are being married, you can keep this for the drawing-room Cicely and you will share together." He rang the bell and ordered a hansom.

"But, sir," the young man stammered, for he had drawn the cheque, "this picture is worth some hundreds of——"

"Is it? I hope so. Well, you and Cicely Evans have been worth more than that to me. No man can price loyal service and friendship, not even at Lloyd's or Capel Court. Good-bye, and good luck to you both."

He carried the Daubigny out himself, placed it in the hansom and sent its new owner away. Then he sauntered back to his parlour and opened the note which had been waiting to be read till business was over.

"Why will you not come to see me? It is not I who have deserted you, it is you who have deserted me.

"G. W."

A month had passed since Jim had talked to Dot in the library, a month in which Dick had been wholly occupied in completing the act of justice which Jim had announced and explained. The details of the settlement had absorbed his whole time, and for more reasons than one he had rigorously abstained from seeing anyone except on business, Kitty alone excepted. Dick twisted up the note and reflected. Gertrude's words were balm to his spirit. For he had found, as he knew he would, that most of the women who had hitherto tried to pet him had, without a word of explanation, promptly dropped him. A discredited financier, practically without a penny, whom Miss Wason, for very good reasons unquestionably had refused to marry, though she was too kind and too proud to punish him by making them public, was a very different person from the great leader who had controlled Amalgamated Aluminium and the Blue Paradise Mines, the politician with a wonderful and certain future before him. Obviously he had behaved outrageously to Miss Wason; that, after all, was only to be expected from the son of the New York gutter, and he was also a pauper. That alone damned him conclusively.

So Dick was left as severely to himself as he desired to be. But now that Gertrude asked him to come and see her he would do it gladly. She, too, had been silent for a month. He had begun to think she had gone the way of the rest. But he was wrong. Her note proved that not only would she tolerate his presence but desired it. She had not deserted him. She would not desert him, because she was made of the same fibre as himself. And he felt at once that to talk to this girl, beautiful, refined, strong in brain and will, would be a real pleasure, and more. She on her side had written for many reasons. She had per-

mitted the weeks to slip by deliberately. Passionately as she desired to see him, she was not going to spoil her triumph at the Manor by unseemly haste, by indecorous lack of restraint. Dick must be taught slowly, very slowly. The new life for them both was to be for ever, and no one understood better than this self-disciplined girl that a marriage of passion, passion, perhaps, in only one of the partners, might end in disaster. Theirs was to be an alliance for great and noble ends, through which the man and the woman would achieve their ambitions and realise themselves in the only sense that "self-realisation" can stand for anything but a shibboleth of the philosophers, invented to conceal the poverty and confusion of their thought. But if the union was to endure and bear the fruits of a worthy ambition, it must also rest on perfect sympathy, perfect trust, and complete identity of purpose. Passion can die as quickly as it is born, but sympathy and trust, maturing with painful slowness, will be stronger with every year to rivet will to will, to organise that concert of power which rests on mutual inspiration. Such a consummation requires infinite patience, but Gertrude had it. For it is only those who can grasp what patience can give them, who can train themselves to be patient. She planned the architecture of life not merely on an imposing scale but also on lines capable of expansion in unforeseen directions, and it was with to-morrow rather than to-day that her spirit always wrestled.

But the occasion of her writing was a visit from Guy Lemare. He had dropped in after lunch. "My cousin is dying," he said simply. "I have to-day been summoned north."

Both Mrs. Wyatt and Gertrude understood at once. The peerage—a viscountship and fifteen thousand a year at least—was to be Sir Guy Lemare's after all. This cousin and he had never been friends. Guy had openly expressed his vehement disapproval of my lord's manners and morals, and for years they had never spoken. But Guy was

correct. It was his place as the heir to be at the dying libertine's bedside and to bury him.

"When I come back," he said to Gertrude, as they shook hands, "the three months you spoke of will be up. Shall you be able to give me my answer, as you promised?"

"I keep my word," she said quietly. "When you come back you shall have your answer." And she promptly sat down and wrote her note to Richard Forster.

Dick walked to the flat through the November slush. He was received by both mother and daughter with the delicate friendliness that showed no recognition in word or act of his altered circumstances. No allusion was made to recent events, and Dick, so quick to appreciate tact, guessed rightly that the presence of Mrs. Wyatt and of two or three other acquaintances was due to Gertrude. It was a subtle and gratifying proof of friendship. When these visitors had gone Mrs. Wyatt rose. "Don't hurry away," she said, "because I have some business to do out of doors. I know that you very seldom accept invitations to dinner. Perhaps you will make us an exception. Gertrude, I will leave you to persuade Mr. Forster to spare us one of his evenings."

Dick saw her into her carriage and came back. This drawing-room with its shaded lights, its refined serenity, was a haven of refuge from the November streets and the solitude of Bloomsbury, and the girl by the fire was worthy of it.

"No one else will come now," she said. "Please"—and she produced a silver cigarette box, containing, he was surprised to find, his favourite brand. He did not know that not even the future viscount was privileged to smoke in this room. She laughingly refused to join him. "Tobacco," she explained, "is not a proof of emancipation but of the reverse. Women nowadays seem to imagine that the only privilege of the freedom they have won is to make a bad imitation for themselves of the chains that fetter men." She rose. "I want you," she said quietly, "to

shake hands. You have done a very brave thing, Mr. Forster, as brave in its conception as in its execution. No woman could have had such a splendid inspiration. Very few men would have dared to be so just. It makes me happy to think that I have known one who could."

"Thank you, Miss Wyatt," he faltered.

She was perfectly sincere. The magnitude of Dick's self-sacrifice was the culminating proof of his greatness. Violet Edwardes and Kitty, who had dared to discuss it, had both showed unmistakably that they regarded it as a proof of his love, not of his sense of justice. But Gertrude was different.

"I am not going to talk about it," she said calmly, "except to say that the sense of true justice is a very rare thing. Your plan to save the Wasons and Mr. Bruce was, let me say so, intrinsically wrong. It succeeded, however, and then the wrong became apparent. That is how I view it. But you have put the wrong right so far as it was in your power. You can face the world now without a twinge of remorse. Whether the world knows that and appreciates it is no matter now. But some of us, I hope, do." She went back to her chair by the fire. His suffering eyes told her she had struck chords of a sympathy too profound for words as much by her unconventional courage as by her swift grasp of his motives and reasons. "And now what is going to be the next step?" she asked, with her persuasive, enigmatic smile.

Dick said nothing. He looked all round the room and then his gaze rested on her face.

"May I be your doctor for a few minutes?" she asked, "and tell you what I think you ought to do?"

He nodded.

"Well, I infer you are done with finance. You are tired of making money. You won a splendid victory some weeks ago, so splendid that it would be difficult to repeat it. Victories can pall. I am not sorry. If I were you I should just continue to live in Bloomsbury for a month

or two, thinking and reading. Only those"—she was speaking slowly but with intense conviction—"only those who can understand great literature know what an anodyne it can be. It is the finest and subtlest of all anodynes, for great literature, the literature of power, is the criticism of life in artistic form by the minds of those who have suffered, suffered but not succumbed. Go to those minds and let them speak to you. The greatest of all literatures you have not yet mastered—Greek. If you want some work, and you will, Mr. Forster, learn Greek. The literature of modern Christian and of modern pagan culture rests on Greek thought; the solid and enduring products of the modern mind from the Middle Ages to our own time, from Aquinas to Hegel and T. H. Green, become a new thing to the man who can read Homer, Æschylus and Plato in their own language. Don't think me a prig, but I am profoundly convinced that true statesmanship for our world of to-day must begin, though it does not end, with the assimilation of Hellenism."

He leaned back in his chair. How marvellously this girl's trained and cultivated mind penetrated his. The anodyne of the literature of power—to read and to think—that was what he had been trying to do, and intended, now that he was free, to continue.

"And then"—her voice grew in animation—"I should ask Jim Wason to come with me to Germany and I should spend a year there. It will be the making of Jim Wason."

"Germany?" he questioned ,with a flash of surprise. "Why?"

"Germany," she answered, smiling, "in the past could always teach us English two things very dissimilar: music and the scientific spirit. If you don't make haste, Mr. Forster, the last will be the only lesson that modern Germany can teach. The new Germany, too ambitious and too impatient for wealth to believe in the idealism that unified it, will soon be simply an object lesson of how little the material side of life can, and how much it cannot,

do for an ambitious people. So go to Germany and you will come back to your friends here and achieve for England, not what you have learned in Germany, but some of the lessons that the permanent spiritual inspiration of Greece has taught our noblest poets, our deepest thinkers and our wisest statesmen."

Dick liked this advice, so simply and so sincerely offered. And how different it was from what all his friends had been dinning into his ears for a month. But when a woman with brains and knowledge makes love, she always does it in an unconventional way, and that is why it is usually so irresistible.

"And why Jim Wason?" he asked.

"For his own sake and yours. After three or four months of solitude it is pleasant and helpful to have a mind to rub against, especially when one is cultivating new impressions. I am still young"—she laughed, with a graceful movement of her head—"perhaps that is why I believe the best mind for an experienced one to rub against is a young one, young but independent."

"And after Germany, Kamchatka and the tents of Kedar, I suppose?" he inquired, throwing his cigarette into the fire.

"Exactly. The Kedar and Kamchatka of our politics."

"Politics?" he repeated. "No, that is impossible."

"Why?"

"Politics need money and respectability. I have neither. I don't know that I want them."

"Respectability"—she shrugged her shoulders. "I might retort that capacity is more important. But do you really imagine that either in Lombard Street or Pall Mall they don't know the truth? The halfpenny evening newspapers, I believe, say you are discredited. If they didn't, I admit it would be serious. But the men who stand on the bridge in politics and finance know better. If you doubt my word, go to the offices of Aluminium Amalgamated, the Blue Paradise Mines, and say you are coming

back, and they will pay you any price you like to mention. Come here to-morrow, and a gentleman with whom you worked once in an election will tell you that the party will take you on your own terms. The man who broke the White Lead Syndicate, the man who sacrificed his fortune that not a widow on either side of the Atlantic might lose a sixpence, would sweep a constituency in an industrial town. In your party, Mr. Forster, there are not many who can do that, and they know it, if you do not. If there are two qualities Demos just shouts for—one is justice, and the other is contempt for wealth—the two things Demos has not got; and if Demos gets them, progress will cease. The one hope to-day for democracy is to keep it struggling after something it must never reach."

"And," Dick objected slowly, evading the challenge, "money?"

Gertrude laughed. "Give the men," she said, "whom you have made—there are plenty in London, more in New York—give them a chance. Be generous. Don't be so proud as to act as if friendship did not imply taking as well as making gifts. And," she added softly, "it is not only men who owe their existence to you. There are women too."

He looked up quickly. The light was glowing in her eyes—that light which intoxicates even strong men.

"Dick," she said, "have you forgotten that you made me, not a rich woman exactly, but one with seventy thousand pounds——"

"Thank you," he said in a low voice. "But I could only take your money, Gertrude, on one condition."

She rose, her heart beating. "Take it or leave it," she whispered, "on any condition; it is yours and yours only——" and her eyes said the rest.

The promise of a new life, the dawn of a new ambition, the call of the old passion trembled in his blood. The desire to live had suddenly bubbled up anew. The winds

in the dreamland of the Spirit that for a whole month had ceased to blow were once again wafting their magic message.

"Do not be in a hurry," she said softly, and she laid a hand on his arm. "Do not be in a hurry. You can achieve far greater things than you have yet done. But they need time—time and a woman's help. If I can trust you, and I have always trusted you, will you not trust me? Believe me, Dick, a woman is happy to wait if by waiting she knows that she can help. And I only want to help"—she paused—"to help you."

Her wonderful self-restraint very nearly conquered. Had she given reins to the passion that made her voice vibrate, her figure instinct with emotion, she would have repelled just that best in him which answered to her appeal.

"My God!" he muttered brokenly, and sat down.

Gertrude trembled. What did that tortured cry mean? In another minute the sight of his suffering would have driven her to take him to her arms. But he had risen.

"You are very, very kind," he said quietly, and she paled from fear, "I do not deserve it; but I will not wrong you. I could only take your money and your help on one condition, and that is impossible. I love her," he pronounced in a sombre despair; "I love her still, and I shall love her to the end."

And Gertrude heard in that sentence the knell to all her dreams.

"It will pass," she said in despair also—"it will pass. Let me help you, even if you cannot give me your heart—yet. Some day in the future perhaps——"

"No," he said. "No."

"You will not desert me, Dick," she whispered. "Do not tell me now I can never be anything to you but a friend. Promise me that if—if in the months to come——"

"If the promise were worth anything you—you should have it. But I know that nothing can alter what I feel.

I neither desire a career now nor have the power to achieve one, because the motive is dead—dead." He could not add to her that one woman, the woman who had rejected him, could alone make the dead ambitions, the dead will, live again. "Good-bye," he said. "Good-bye!"

He had turned away when she stretched her arms in a cry of despairing passion. "Dick, Dick, kiss me once before you go—for ever."

"I cannot," he said with a tender pathos; "do not ask me, Gertrude. It would be a wrong to you and—treason to her."

And with that sublimely ruthless farewell he left her.

She flung back her arms slowly in pain. This last appeal had failed too. Once in her arms she had hoped—ah! She had failed—failed! There was no hope now. This man could never be hers, never; for love is inspired neither by the soul nor by the body—the love that creates the will to live. It is life itself, in all its baffling complexity, all its strange simplicity, born, if it is born at all, with the particular self that determines the individual, bestowed like the other inexplicable processes of life—sleep and desire, disease and health, decay and death. And—Gertrude now recognised her love could not have made him great. It would have given him at best the husk, the appearance of a reality which it travestied; the hollowness of which would have mocked and tortured him and her. It was bitter to have stooped to ignoble and contemptible means, to have allied with ignoble and contemptible men; but her love was to atone for, his was to obliterate, the stain; it was bitter to know that a child without the knowledge that she had acquired by scorning all the delights a beautiful girl is expected to enjoy as her right, without her grand conception of ambition, without her beauty, had inspired the love that was the mainspring of this man's life; it was bitter that her success should end in defeat. But the severity of her punishment went far deeper than

this: it penetrated into the deepest emotions of a woman's nature. Failure this evening meant the failure of her own life. She would always be beautiful; no one could rob her of her brains, and her knowledge, her power to appreciate the noble, the severe, the true, the beautiful in thought, in literature, in art, in music—but in spite of all these gifts she could never become, without this man's love, the woman she dreamed he should make her, and could have made her, had she only been different. Yes, she had failed just because, as a woman, she lacked something that was Dot's. Passion, as it must, had been an element in the love of both, but the spiritual was to Dot a reality, a part of herself: to Gertrude only a gift to be acquired. The woman whom Dick could make great, the woman who could make him great, must not win the spiritual as she can win knowledge. She must be it, live it, as it expresses itself, perforce, through the material mechanism of the soul's tenement of clay. Cruellest of all, by separating these two whose love was so necessary to each other, she had ruined his life; she had cut him off from the blood and the air without which his greatness would slowly wither, shrivel and die. Without Dot's love which had inspired the most splendid act of his life, he would remain poor, impotent, misunderstood, small. Gertrude had despised love, as woman's weakness; then she had clung to it as a woman's only hope. She had appealed to Love, the Judge, and this evening sentence had been pronounced —sentence of punishment, lasting for life.

CHAPTER XXIX

A COMPULSORY CHOICE

KITTY put her teacup down and waited anxiously. She had been speaking for ten minutes with some hesitation, but with a pleading earnestness that flushed her face with exquisite colour.

"No," Dick answered deliberately, "it is impossible." He was standing by the fireplace in his sitting-room and his eyes rested on the blank in the wall amongst the books where Dot's portrait had hung.

"But you love her," Kitty rejoined quickly, "you love her still."

He walked slowly across the room, hands behind his back, so that his face was hidden.

"And she loves you," Kitty added with conviction.

"No"—he turned and confronted her from the bookcase—"I cannot believe that."

"But——" she began.

"It is five weeks," he interrupted almost harshly, "since you saw her last in the library. If—if it were as you say, she would have come to see you. Lemare has apologised to you. Jim has told her the truth, but she"—he sternly repressed the emotion in his voice—"she has not said one word; she has made no sign all these weeks."

"There are special reasons—I at least cannot forget them. Reflect for a moment what it must be to a woman like Dot to pardon—me, to accept me as Jim's wife, the mistress of the home—such a home—where her stainless mother lived and her grandmother before her. I," Kitty spoke with ruthless deliberation, "I am not the wife a proud sister can welcome at once for her only brother. No, her silence is excusable, it is just——"

"We need not discuss it, my dear," he broke in sadly.

"The fact remains that she has left us to bear her silence as we may. I do not blame her, but I cannot take the comfort you are trying to give me."

Kitty took up her teacup with a sigh. She could not deceive him. Dot's silence had hurt her sorely, and of her real feelings she knew nothing. She was accustomed too, by long experience, to find herself impotent to move this man's iron will. But to find him incapable of being stirred by any appeal to his ambition, to his heart—that was new and terrible to her. It was as if the iron will were now a dead will, the strong heart a dead heart.

"No," he had begun again, speaking aloud to himself as he had so often done when he and she had debated their plans together, "it is impossible. I could not go to her. To force myself upon her in order to tell her that my life is still in her hands—she who, because I wronged her, deceived her, has rejected me for ever—would only be insult upon injury. Even if she cared, still I could not do it. It would be the plea of the beggar asking for her money, asking her to give back what love and justice"—he eyed the long rows of books with clenched fingers—"no, it is impossible."

Kitty listened with mute anguish. Yes, it was impossible. The man that Dick was could not go to Dot now. Yet if he did not, his life would remain a wreck. Dot alone could bring back to the world of living men the Richard Forster Kitty had seen grow from the clerk in New York to the financier of yesterday. There was but one way, one hope left. Dot must come to him. Dot who was as proud, as independent, as inflexible as himself.—Was this, too, impossible?

"Wronged her?" Kitty quietly returned to this self-accusation. "Are you not making too much of that?"

"Have you forgotten your own warnings? Did I not encourage her at Oban to care for me when my own heart was untouched? Did I not ask her to marry me without telling her all the truth? Did I not deliberately allow her

to believe that I was a different man to what I was? That belief was her love.—By my own acts I shattered it. What right had I "—he paused—" to let you come to the library that night? To you it was cruel; to her treason, treason—though, God knows, from the moment that I first met her to the hour when we parted, I did nothing but what I thought was in her interest and for her sake."

Kitty rose. " Dick," she said, tears in her eyes, " this is my fault. It is I—I who lost you Dot whom you loved, because you were more loyal to me whom you did not love."

He let her hands rest on his shoulders. He looked into that beautiful face, pained by remorse.

" No, no," he answered. " You have helped me always, my dear, my loyal friend. And at last you have found your reward—the love of a man who is worthy of you."

" Dick, Dick," she sobbed on his shoulder, " I sometimes think that much as I care for Jim, he is nothing to me compared with you. You have made the lives of so many of us—but your own, your own——"

" Yes," he interrupted quietly, " the reason for my failure goes down to the sternest truths in the lives of men and women. I have failed to make my own life a success because I was wrong from the first."

She went back to her chair and listened sadly. " To realise myself—that was my one and only ambition. Then I desired that Dot should realise herself for me—Dot as I selfishly conceived she should be: the innocent, loving child. I held that miserable superficial view that innocence is the same as ignorance. Now I have learned that the woman's innocence is not the child's, that if the woman is what love can make her, knowledge will only strengthen, purify, deepen the spiritual in her, and that against the innocence of her womanhood sin and evil and the knowledge of the world will beat in vain. I forgot, too, that when a man relentlessly pursues a selfish aim as I did, he must stand alone. If—if he deliberately invites

another—a woman—to share his life, his first duty is to her. The self that marriage can be used to realise is the union of what is best in husband and wife, and this will only come from absolute surrender—each to each in perfect trust. Bitter experience has forced me to see these truths—too late! As far as my own life is concerned, I have failed miserably."

He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

It was not a moment for words of consolation. And Kitty knew it. The strong man was unstrung. She must give him time—be patient.

"And now," she asked gently, after a painful silence, "your future, your plans: what are you going to do?"

He raised his head. The tired, worn face looked resolute still. "Next week I sail for West Africa. There are diseases out there that require strong men to fight them in order that their secrets may be discovered. Service to mankind and the empire can be done there. I am strong, and my strength shall be given to the noble martyrs of science and humanity—who are wrestling on the Niger and Congo with black-water fever and the sleeping sickness."

She sprang up in terror. "But that is death, certain death——"

"Don't imagine I am going to throw away my life. No, I am going to work—forget—atone—if I can."

It was useless to expostulate, but her purpose too was taking shape. She was seeing her way to a last chance of saving him.

"The carriage is here," she said, moving to the door. "Next week? You will come to say good-bye?

"Of course."

He helped her into her fur jacket, marking in approving silence what a beautiful picture she made, with her gold hair under the fur toque and her eyes soft with the love and happiness which not even her present distress could extinguish.

"Tom has escaped to Mexico," she said, turning to him. "Dick, dear, for my sake you will now let him go free?"

"Oh, very well," he answered grimly. "You are still paying for him of course?"

"I cannot let him starve."

"And that miserable wife of his?"

"Poor thing! she has done no wrong. Like me, she followed her heart, but unlike me she never found a friend. Jim and I are going to bring up her son—give him a chance of being a gentleman, since it is the class to which he by right belongs. What is the use of my father's money unless his daughter can feel pity as well as do justice?"

He made no answer, and she took his head in her hands and kissed him on the forehead before she left him to the loneliness of his room where the blank on the wall spoke with every page turned, with every thought at his solitary meals.

And as Kitty drove home she was thinking of the task she had set herself. Yet how was she, whom Dot would not see, to accomplish it, unless she accepted the hateful alternative that had forced itself on her mind? Well, deeply wounded though she was by Dot's silence to herself, that bitterness was as nothing to what she felt at the wreck of a great man's life, and if only she, whom Dick had refused to betray when he could have defended himself, could save him, she would endure any humiliation. But—she looked up—a sudden gleam shone in her eyes, a sudden thought had flashed into her mind. There was yet another alternative, and it was a fitting moment for justice.

She pulled the cord sharply and gave the coachman a new direction.

The carriage stopped. Yes, Miss Wyatt was at home. Kitty awaited her in the drawing-room. But when Gertrude entered swiftly, by a subtle intuition, the one woman silently arrested the secret of the other, divined even that Dick in his hour of sorrow and need had turned away from the consolation of this splendid womanhood. Was

not that written in Gertrude's eyes? Kitty understood it all, and felt no pity in these first moments as she stood facing the girl who had ruthlessly destroyed his happiness in the unscrupulous determination to win her own.

"A letter received to-day," Kitty began, with relentless directness, "has explained certain things I did not understand before. Tom Hennessy informs me that when he wrote to Mr. Bruce, as you and I had good cause to remember, he wrote practically at your dictation—you even posted the letter yourself to ensure its arrival at the right moment."

Gertrude halted sharply and looked at her. "Well?" she said coolly.

"I have no intention to go into the events of that evening again, but"—Kitty paused—"I must also remind you that it was you—you, her friend and Mr. Forster's friend, who sent Miss Wason down to the library that night."

Gertrude faced her. "I am not in this room to listen to insulting remarks. Be good enough to say at once what your object is in coming here."

"I am here to offer you two alternatives. Either to-morrow I shall tell the whole story of your miserable manœuvres to Miss Wason, to Mr. Forster, to Mr. Wason, to Sir Guy Lemare,"—she lingered on the last name and noticed that Gertrude's hands suddenly clenched—"or you, you with your own lips, will tell Miss Wason the whole truth."

Gertrude walked slowly across the room and stood by the fireplace.

"I say nothing," Kitty went on, "of the wrong you did to an innocent girl, of your cruelty to myself, of the revenge I might now take if I chose. It is because you have wrecked a man's life, a man to whom I owe more than I can ever repay, that I have compelled myself to come to you. Richard Forster must be saved. Either Miss Wason shall hear the truth from you to-morrow, or I shall do as I said. Choose."

"And if I do not choose?"

"Then I place this letter from Tom Hennessy in Mr. Wason's hands when I leave you, and at my request he shall ask Sir Guy Lemare—Lord Ilkley I should have said—to be present when he informs his sister of all that took place. If, on the contrary, you wisely take Miss Wason into your confidence without delay, not one word of all this shall ever pass my lips. God knows I have no wish to be hard on any woman."

A long pause. The clock ticked on the mantelpiece and Kitty remained standing in the middle of the room watching, not without a touch of admiration, the outward calm of the girl who knew that with a word she could be crushed.

At last Gertrude spoke. "There is no alternative," she said in a low clear tone, as if she were summing up the debate in her own mind. "I will go to Dorothy Wason."

"Thank you. I hope it will not be too late," and giving merely a slight inclination of her head, she turned and left the room. Yet, hot as her indignation had been, her tender heart suffered now for the cruel humiliation justice and mercy alike had required her to inflict on a proud woman. She knew—ah, how well she knew! at this moment that if love and ambition had conspired to tempt Gertrude Wyatt to sin, life already was meting out to her a stern retribution. Could her bitterest enemy have desired a deeper mortification for that soaring spirit than the obligation to confess her shame to the woman who had robbed her of Richard Forster, and by so doing had doomed her life to be a failure?

"Mr. Wason has been, ma'am," were the words with which her maid greeted her as she entered the hall of her house a few minutes later.

"He has gone!" Kitty exclaimed in dismay.

"But he has left Miss Wason——"

Kitty flung open the door of her little drawing-room

and went quickly to the forlorn girl sitting patiently by the fireplace.

Dot rose.

"Kitty," she said softly, stumbling to meet her, "I have come to ask forgiveness——"

And Kitty, with impulsive eagerness, took her hands into her own and pressed them. "Oh," she murmured in happy agitation, "I have suffered from your silence, because I wanted you to love me. I have longed, hungered, for this moment, but through it all I have understood. Hush!" she cried as Dot once more asked for her forgiveness, "you are here, that is enough; words are not needed now," and she took the sobbing girl to her heart.

And there by the fireplace, where Kitty had so often rebelled against the prison bars of the past and the fetters forged by herself, where she had burned Jim's photograph and learned that love means sacrifice of self, these two so painfully parted made their peace by mutual confessions, and linked again with tears the friendship begun where the evening lights of opal and rose flush the Western tides that lap the Land of Lorne.

CHAPTER XXX

A FRIENDLY CONSPIRACY

"I KNEW." Dot was standing in the twilight in the library beside Violet Edwardes, who had unexpectedly motored down to the Manor House on Sunday afternoon.

"You knew! Guy then has been here?"

"No, not Guy, but Gertrude." Dot's eyes were veiled.

"She came to tell you?"

"She was here yesterday," Dot answered evasively.

"Well, I am glad she has consented at last, though I am afraid her friends will say that she waited until the coronet was a certainty. She will make a splendid viscountess," she went on lightly, "and if any woman to-day can revive the salon, it is she."

"Yes, Gertrude is certainly fitted to do that," Dot assented gravely.

"To make a salon a success, you don't want a heart, only a head; so in her case there will be no drawbacks." Violet stirred her tea cosily. "I can't believe in Gertrude loving any man. I should guess that she is marrying Guy probably because she dislikes him less than anyone else."

For some minutes Dot did not speak, and when she did, it was with restrained feeling.

"Every woman can love, Vi; Gertrude, I am sure, more strongly than most; but every woman will love in her own way, and I think Gertrude is discovering that love does not come without teaching lessons that you never expect. She is happy," she added slowly, "in being one of the few who are permitted to turn the lessons to account."

Violet looked at her with quick curiosity, but Dot was stooping over Savvy. The girl was deliberately concealing

her face and her friend felt she must ask no questions. Nor was there time, for the funereal Henderson entered with her cloak and announced that the motor was at the door.

"And when am I going to see you again?" Violet inquired, taking the cloak and dismissing Henderson. "Tea some day this week perhaps—any day but Wednesday, because that is the day Mr. Forster comes——" She stopped as if she had made a slip.

"Mr. Forster," Dot questioned in a measured voice, "comes——?"

"To say good-bye."

"Is he leaving England?"

"Kitty did not tell you?" (oh, Violet, as if you did not know that!) "Yes, he sails for West Africa on Thursday."

"West Africa?" Dot paused, and Violet noted the pain in her eyes.

"Oh, he is very strong," she answered cheerfully, "and he has promised not to run any unnecessary risks. He will be back again, possibly, in two years. White men are not permitted to stay long at a time on that coast I am told." She turned up her collar and fastened her veil. "What do you say to Tuesday, Dot—Tuesday at four-thirty? You agree?—excellent." She kissed her affectionately, patted the dogs and went off to find Mrs. Ottoway.

Dot made no attempt to follow her visitor into the hall. She remained alone in the library leaning against the mantelpiece, her head resting on her hand. She was miserable, miserable. Gertrude had fulfilled her promise of the previous day to Kitty, and her startling revelation—though made with due regard for her own feelings—was the culminating point in the bitter pain which Dot had suffered during the past weeks. How wrong, how cruelly, arrogantly wrong, she had been to Kitty, above all to Dick! In the library here she had believed the worst of him, had dared to conclude that her unjust, her ignoble

suspicions were fully confirmed. She had condemned him a second time by appealing to his sense of justice. She had compelled him, because he was noble and she was not, to ruin himself. How could she have done these things? How could she for one moment have thought him—Dick, her great, her gifted Dick, the man she adored—false, immoral, unscrupulous, self-seeking, wholly unworthy of the love she had given him? Dick, who had risked all for her sake, given all to spare her from humiliation, and her home and family from the ruin wrought by a gambler's conscienceless folly. Her thoughts flew back to that first meeting on the cliffs at Plage-sur-Mer, to the flawless felicity of those radiant days by the Western seas, to the terrible moment when in this very room she had sentenced him to poverty and disgrace, yet from his lips had never had one bitter word. She wrung her hands, standing once more before the bar of her own judgment, and called herself aloud heartless and insane.

What was she to do—what could she do? Nothing—nothing. It was easy to atone to Kitty, to confess and be forgiven; and Kitty was happy—happy in her love, happy once more in her friendship. But Dick—his life was ruined. The fever-stricken swamps of the Niger Delta instead of the career in England that was his by his own effort, instead of the great career he had planned. To this she had brought him, she who had promised to love, to trust, to uphold. Worse, she had, she must have, destroyed his faith in womanhood. She who had acted in obedience to the dictates of her conscience, had taught him that a woman's love had no place for charity, for loyalty. What would she do now? Go to him and say that she loved him still, loved him far more deeply, more truly than she had ever done? Impossible. Unconsciously she used Dick's own expression, but unlike him she did not repeat it. *Was* it impossible? Her pride, her doubting heart alike rebelled. For was it not more than possible that he loved her no longer? He could not think of her as he had done

before she had behaved so cruelly and so unjustly. She had killed his love by her own acts. Had she not proof of it in his intention to go to West Africa—perhaps to death—without one word, one syllable of parting. But—she raised her head and faced the dark—her obligations were none the less binding. Justice and her love—they were the same now—imperiously demanded that she should make a full and humble confession, and some day, perhaps, in West Africa, he would learn to forgive and forget. Some day he might even send her a message that would ease the pain and the loneliness of the coming years when she would have left the Manor to Kitty and Jim, and would feel her womanhood slowly shrivelling away in the bitterness of a love lost by her own injustice. Yes, it must be done.

She lit the lamp and sat down feverishly to write to him. Letter after letter was torn up; the church bell sounded, but she let it ring itself out while she struggled to find the words that she wanted—struggled and failed. Finally, as many of us have done, she abandoned the attempt with tears.

No, it must be face to face or peace would never come. Violet must help her—promise when she went to her on Tuesday that she should see him for a moment when on Wednesday he came to say good-bye. Yes, that was how it must be done. She would write to Violet now and ask her.

Next morning Violet read the pitiful little note with a smile, and over it Kitty presently smiled too, though she asked no questions. Thus for forty-eight hours these two tender hearts enjoyed the pleasure of a conspiracy that was a deep secret of their own making. So, a little to her surprise, when Dot knocked at Violet's door on Tuesday, the smart parlour-maid, in the most matter-of-fact way—she had had explicit instructions and was half in the plot—invited her to wait. Mrs. Edwardes, she said, was expected every minute. And in the dusk of the empty drawing-

room Dot sat patiently on, yet impatient. What had Violet to tell her? for Violet had not answered her note. Would she help her as she had implored her to do? Would——

"Mr. Forster!" Polly the parlour-maid quietly announced, opening wide the door. It closed with a gentle snap and the excited girl nearly exceeded her orders by locking it, but wisely contented herself with removing the key and listening as long as she dared through the keyhole.

Dot had risen to her feet, trembling. Was it Tuesday or Wednesday? Was he here by appointment or accident? Her mind was a whirling chaos, her breath came quick as she watched him advance into the centre of the room. For Dick, aware that another visitor was waiting, was prepared, with some annoyance, to be polite. Then in a moment he recognised her and halted.

"I am sorry," he said slowly, "but I did not know that—or I should not——"

"You did not know?" Dot questioned, hardly aware what she was saying.

"No."

"You would not have come if you had known I was here?"

To this there was no answer. He moved back towards the door.

"Oh, do not go, do not go!" she pleaded. "There is something I wish to say—I am here to say."

"You knew I was coming to-day?" The question slipped out.

"No; but you are here, and I can say to-day what I intended to say to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

Outside the door the parlour-maid decided that this was the moment to bring in tea and turn on the electric light. To both the interruption seemed an eternity, and to both it was a shock, for they saw for the first time the worn look, the tired and pained eyes in each other.

"You are leaving England on Thursday?" Dot began, breaking the silence when they were once more alone.

"No."

"But Violet——" she faltered.

"Yesterday I changed my mind. I was to have said good-bye to Mrs. Edwardes to-morrow, and I am here to-day instead, as it suits her arrangements better. I beg your pardon——" he broke off.

"I did not say anything," Dot answered; but her gentle exclamation showed she understood now if Dick did not.

"Then you are not going to West Africa?" she ventured to ask, for Dick had taken refuge in silence.

"No."

A long pause. Dot was mastering her agitation, and at last she felt able to say, "Forgive me for asking, but I—I want you to tell me what you are going to do."

"I am going back to business." Dick's voice was hardly steady, for her question had strangely thrilled him. "In a few weeks I shall sail for South America. The Blue Paradise Mine people have acquired out there a new and, they believe, a valuable concession. They have asked me to go and take their affairs in hand, to assume, in fact, entire control, and I have accepted. I was to have explained that to Mrs. Edwardes this afternoon."

"I understood you had entirely given up your business career," Dot replied in a low voice. "I am glad you have not. But why—why have you changed your mind?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell you that."

Dot looked at him. Oh! she had been right, miserably right—he had ceased to care. She must make her confession and let him go. But she lingered a moment yet on the brink, hardly mistress of herself, and dreading that if his eyes rested on her again their mute anguish would make her fling herself at his feet in a passion of tears.

"Will you not—not tell me those reasons?" she began, trembling. "I ask for them as a great favour."

Dick mastered himself with an effort. "I changed my

mind because I saw what I had not seen until yesterday, that I was doing wrong by refusing to go back to the life for which I was best qualified, to the work which would lead to independence and a career again."

"Wrong to whom?"

Pause. "To you."

"To me?" Her face went white and she caught at a chair for support. "To me?" she repeated, dazed.

"Yes, Miss Wason, to you." Fate had brought them face to face, and she should hear what he had hitherto lacked courage and opportunity to say.

"I had brought misery into your life"—she raised a feeble hand in protest—"yes, I shattered your happiness, your dreams, the faith you had reposed in the man who was to share your future. I did you a great, an irreparable wrong, for which I cannot atone. But I can prevent myself from being guilty of a second wrong to you—of making you responsible for the ruin of my own life. I conceive it to be my duty to you now not to fling away such powers as are left to me for work. That, Miss Wason, is my sole, my simple reason."

She came nearer to him, a wonderful light shining in her face. "Then you do still care a little what I think and feel?"

Care a little! He could not answer her for a moment.

He spoke at last. "I know I cannot hope to do much now, but the little I can do is better than playing the coward and encumbering the earth."

"Why can you not hope to become successful, great as you planned? Is it"—she hesitated—"because you are poor?"

"No, that is not the reason. Money I shall certainly want, but Kitty will lend me what I need."

"Kitty!"

"She helped me once," he corrected gently, but with a flash of the old pride, "when I was poor long ago. She will willingly help me again—and I shall be glad to take

her money, for by taking it I can pay back a little of what I owe to her. She made me years ago. She wishes to make me a second time."

Dot's fingers clasped and unclapsed. "You will take all this from Kitty"—her lip trembled—"all this? Kitty," she repeated with sudden bitterness—"yes, Kitty will perhaps make you great a second time."

"She cannot do that," he interrupted. "Her loyal friendship can help me to work, but she cannot create what is necessary for greatness, the will to achieve the best of which a man was once capable."

"If friendship and money cannot do it, what can?"

He was silent.

"Answer me," she pleaded softly.

Shaken by her voice, her manner, yet still incredulous, he looked away, unable to meet the eyes he knew so well.

"Nothing, now."

She barely caught the whispered words.

"No, nothing, nothing!—because of me. You never wronged me, never, but I—oh, let me speak—speak while I have courage to say that I have been unjust, hard, disloyal, heartless! I cannot undo the past—I do not deserve that it should be undone; but I can, I do, ask you to forget. I do implore you to carry out your merciful resolve to begin life anew. Thank God for the great, the generous heart that could so resolve to spare me after all my wicked folly——"

Something in his face arrested her.

"Dick!" she cried passionately, stretching out her hands to him, "Dick, you shall not take Kitty's money. Take mine." She lifted her face to him, the shining eyes had grown dim. "Let what is mine be yours—yours now and for ever."

"Sweetheart!" he clasped her to his arms.

The door had opened softly and was as softly closed. Violet ran down the stairs and burst into the dining-room. Jim and Kitty, who were waiting, and had forgotten the

fact, sprang up. Jim gave a suppressed cheer, but Violet put her finger demurely on her lips.

"I cannot, apparently, have tea here," she said, and she kissed him because she must kiss somebody, "for I am not wanted in my dining-room. I cannot have tea in my drawing-room because Kitty has arranged otherwise. I shall go and have tea with Polly in the kitchen."

"Dick," Dot was saying upstairs, "you will never treat me as I treated you—oh, you will trust me now, always, and for ever? If I had only trusted you with a child's unquestioning trust, we should never have been parted."

"No," he answered very tenderly, "it is better as it is, far better. Without suffering, none of us can learn all that love can teach. And, Dot, it is not the child's trust that a man needs, but the woman's—the woman who has kept all that is precious in the child's innocence." He paused and, as if moved by a sudden thought, drew the curtain back, and together they stood in silence looking into the wintry street. "My dear, my dear," he added presently, "those lights out there remind me mysteriously of Oban Bay. Do you remember the July evenings when you and I listened to the yacht's bells chiming a message we did not understand across the summer sea? Do you remember that day in the heather on the island when we spoke first of love? We were both wrong, were we not? It is not Love the Gift nor Love the Debt; it is Love the Judge that has taught us our lesson, Love, the Judge of Life."

And Dot's heart whispered that he was right.

THE END

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